PRICE TWO SHILLINGS

CURRENT REPENTANCE

LONDON: J. & R. MAXWELL.

A novel, the scene of which is partly in England,
and partly in India. Of the author nothing is known.

RB75862

Library

of the

University of Toronto

CURRENT REPENTANCE

A Novel

By ALBERT BULMAN

> *Chief Justice.* Pr'ythee, peace:—Pay her the debt you owe her, and unpay the villainy you have done her: the one you may do with sterling money, and the other with current repentance.
>
> *King Henry the Fourth*, Act ii. sc. 1.

LONDON
JOHN & ROBERT MAXWELL
MILTON HOUSE, ST. BRIDE STEET
AND
SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET, E.C.

[*All rights reserved.*]

CONTENTS.

CHAP. PAGE

I. SLAGBY 1

II. MARY LEE MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE, AND HER FATHER BREAKS OFF WITH AN OLD ONE 14

III. MARY HAS TWO STRINGS TO HER BOW, BUT THEY GET TWISTED 29

IV. THE OLD STORY 42

V. THE COMMISSIONER OF BÉSHUCKABAD . . 57

VI. MR. STEEL HAS HIS EYES OPENED—A PAINFUL OPERATION 68

VII. MR. STEEL GOES OFF TRIUMPHANTLY WITH THE OLD LOVE, BUT HIS WIFE COMES ON LESS PROSPEROUSLY WITH THE NEW . . . 80

VIII. BELLA STEEL PLAYS TRUANT FROM CHURCH, WHICH LEADS TO SOME UNEXPECTED RESULTS 93

IX. TO-MORROW TO FRESH FIELDS AND PASTURES NEW 111

X. ADVENTURES BY THE WAY 132

XI. GRACE HAWTHORN FINDS A NEW ARISTOCRATIC ADMIRER 156

XII. DIKNUGGER AND THE DIKNUGGERITES . . 174

XIII. MRS. STEEL TREADS THE THORNY PATH OF DUTY 193

XIV. CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE 211

XV. DR. BRANDLING'S ESCAPADES 232

XVI. TWO ROBUST COURTSHIPS COME TO AN UNTIMELY DEATH, ONE HAVING CAUGHT COLD AT THE FUNERAL OF THE OTHER 254

XVII. CRESSIDA IN THE GRECIAN CAMP . . . 270

CHAP. PAGE
XVIII. RAVENSMORE PROVES THAT THERE ARE OTHER SLIPS THAN BETWEEN THE CUP AND THE LIP 290
XIX. FATHER AND CHILD 301
XX. GRACE TAKES HER COURSE, AND MEETS WITH AN ADVENTURE 315
XXI. ONE OF GRACE'S LOVERS FOLLOWS HER . . 330
XXII. THE OTHER FOLLOWS DUTY 345
XXIII. THE END 358

CURRENT REPENTANCE

CHAPTER I.

SLAGBY

MANY years ago I was witness of a curious little drama, played on an obscure country stage. And as, long afterwards, the fortunes of my dearest friend happened to become involved with those of one of the persons who had acted a principal part in these early scenes, the memory which I retained of them became invested for me with a deep interest. I cannot expect that others should feel the same. Still, as the story with its sequel seems to me to present some striking views of character, I think it may not be found altogether without an interest, independent of personal feelings for the actors.

When I was somewhere about twelve years old, my father—a widower—could not, I suppose, any longer endure my presence at home, as I continued to wax in mischievousness in exact proportion as my growth in strength and stature gave me capacity for it. But being a poor man, the packing me off to school was not for him the simple matter which it might have been for some other parents. He had to discover a schoolmaster able and willing at once to train my tender mind in the ingenuous arts, and to satisfy my youthful appetite—which was of a much more robust constitution—with beef and bread and butter, and all for a maximum allowance of thirty pounds a year. Such a desideratum was, however, found in the person of the Reverend Mr. Lee.

This clergyman was one of the most remarkable men I have ever met, and certainly without exception the most disagreeable. He was a man who must originally have possessed very great powers of mind, and, at some period of his life, have exerted them in a legitimate way, for he was undoubtedly an excellent classical scholar; indeed, his proficiency in this branch of learning had obtained him the post of head-master in an old and well-reputed grammar-school in the North. But he had such a diabolical temper—I use the adjective advisedly, and as the only one which could fully and accurately express my meaning, and not as it is often loosely employed, to indicate mere violence or moroseness—he had, I say, such a truly diabolical temper, such a malignant delight in cruelty, such a faculty for drawing out all that was evil, and crushing all that was good, in those whom ill-luck brought under his influence, as aroused horror even in the not over-sensitive breasts of old-fashioned Yorkshire patersfamilias. A dark whisper used to prevail, in the days when I was subject to his tender discipline, that his career at the grammar-school had culminated—and terminated—in his flogging a boy to death. But whether this may or may not be strictly true, certain it is that he was turned out of his office in disgrace, after all but irretrievably ruining the school.

He had then disappeared from the ken of the world for many years, and was supposed during that period to have been put to some very equivocal shifts for his livelihood. He reëmerged at last, and, luckily for him, he did so within reach of a buoy to which he was able to cling, and which kept him afloat, though with lips just above the surface, for the rest of his life. This buoy was a rotund, jolly parson, named Crovesworth. He was the younger son of an Indian "nabob," who, having left his native village to take up the appointment of surgeon's mate on board an East Indiaman, had come back to it a dozen years later to buy the manor on which it stood, and two or three adjacent ones as well. Thenceforth Crovesworth of Goldmore Hall was to be among the chief magnates of ——shire; and as a necessary corollary to that proposition, successive Revs. Clive, Hastings, Vansittart, or Barlow Crovesworths were to be rectors of Brahminster, the richest living in the same county.

I am not learned in matters ecclesiastical, and I don't know whether the particular Rev. Vansittart Crovesworth of whom I have to speak just now was a pluralist or not, nor whether Slagby was a separate fold which owned him as pastor, or was merely an adjunct of Brahminster. Anyhow, he was responsible for the provision of a certain number of weekly services within the crumbling gray walls and under the rickety old roof of Slagby Church. And as neither his tastes, his figure, nor his habits, adapted him for a seven or eight miles' ride across pathless moors and rugged hills every Sunday, he was obliged to devolve this duty on a deputy. The selection of a fit person for this office was always a somewhat difficult task to the good rector of Brahminster, because special qualifications were required for it, the most essential of which was the possession in a high degree of the Christian virtue of contentment. The other of the two factors which, according to St. Paul, go to make up great riches, was, perhaps, in Mr. Crovesworth's view, of less consequence. So long as the curate of Slagby considered himself "passing rich on forty pounds a year," which was the portion that the rector set aside out of his twelve hundred or so for the spiritual sustenance of his Slagby flock, no very close inquiry was made into matters of doctrine. But even on such terms it was not easy to find a curate for the charge. Slagby was, in fact, about as unattractive a place of residence as it would be easy to find within the four seas of Britain. Its situation was solitary and wild to a degree which the lovers of those qualities in scenery find it hard to discover nowadays in the remotest nooks of this over-peopled land. But it was hideously dreary, ugly, and unromantic. It stood in the midst of a tumbled waste of low hills and "blasted heaths." There was not a tree nearer than the avenue of Goldmore Hall, some six miles off. The ordinary signs of pastoral life even were absent from the barren moors. But man, nevertheless, proclaimed his presence there, and that in the most offensive manner he has of doing so, viz., by digging mines. And the curate's parishioners consisted of lead-miners—a generation as dull and heavy as the ore they dug for, about as low a type of humanity as it would be easy to find outside Central Australia, scattered about in little settlements of wretched hovels, hidden away in gloomy nooks of the bleak hills.

How a church and parsonage had come to be built in the neighbourhood I cannot say; but I think it unlikely that any member of the Crovesworth family, the present owners of the land and the mines, had erected them. However, there they were, grim and ruinous, but unmistakably modern—late eighteenth century in style; the church as unvenerable, and the parsonage as cheerless, as it is possible for a church and parsonage to be.

The little graveyard, which surrounded the church and adjoined the Parsonage garden, has always been my ideal of the abomination of desolation. The thought of laying one's bones beneath the tangled weeds and rank grass of that melancholy spot must have added a new pang to the horror of death in the minds of most mortals. But as the experience which the rude forefathers of Slagby had had of "the warm precincts of the cheerful day" had been chiefly acquired in the bowels of a lead-mine, perhaps their imaginations were less susceptible to feelings of this kind than those of persons who spend their lives in more sunny occupations. The place of recreation for the living was only a degree less depressing than the place of rest for the dead which it adjoined. It may be that the fact that some of the dreariest hours of my life have been the "play-hours" passed in that damp and weed-grown area, ironically called the parsonage garden, has added a sombre shade to the picture of it left on my mind's eye; but in itself, and without any colouring from associations, it was surely a sadder spot than any garden to be found off the shores of the Dead Sea.

It happened that Mr. Lee had been at college with the rector of Brahminster, and in the extremity of his destitution, when nearly starving, bethought himself of applying to his old fellow-student for help. What the success of his application might have been under other circumstances we need not inquire. Suffice it to say, that in the existing juncture it met with such a generous response as Lee's wildest hopes had not looked for. He had expected at the most a loan of five pounds, and he got a provision for life, which, to a man who for years had been accustomed to regard a dish of tripe as a rare feast, was munificent.

During the brief period in which Mr. Lee lived in the world of respectability he had married, and his wife must have been a very different being from himself; but the poor lady never emerged from the deep waters which overwhelmed them so soon after their marriage. When he reappeared and took up his abode at Slagby Parsonage he was a widower, with two children, whose widely separated ages proved that they represented the principle of the survival of the fittest from a much larger number. Their fitness for survival, however, was by no means manifest in their appearance; they both seemed fragile creatures. The elder—a girl, when I first knew her, of sixteen—must have taken after her mother, for she was extremely beautiful, with a delicate, mild, spiritual beauty; and her disposition corresponded, being affectionate and winning in the extreme. The younger, a boy of seven or eight, had in his features much of his father's harsh and sinister expression, and in his temper a morose sullenness which I have no doubt needed only the change of position from that of the flogged to that of the flogger to develop into his father's malignant cruelty.

Ah! those floggings were things to be remembered, and, frequent as they were, they never staled; to-morrow's was as fresh, vigorous, and thrilling as yesterday's. Mr. Lee's favourite instrument of chastisement was the stout leathern thong of the post-bag in which the Parsonage letters used to be brought from Brahminster. And I really believe that the bag itself, and the form of sending it in twice a week on the shoulder of a crippled old miner, was kept up solely with a view to providing a convenient scourge for me and Bob Lee; for I don't believe the parson boasted a correspondent—not even a dun, as duns presuppose credit, and I suspect his credit had disappeared long ago.

His daughter Mary's petticoats of course protected her, at any rate after she had reached the age at which I knew her, from this particular form of discipline. But for her he had a more refined, but not less exquisite, mode of torture. I have read somewhere of a barbarous practice in vogue amongst a class of hunters, who are in the habit of stalking their game behind oxen, trained to be guided by a string tied to the tip of the horn; and in order to make the nerves at the base of the beast's horns sufficiently sensitive to feel and obey the jerks of the cord, the horns themselves are belaboured with a stick for hours and days, until the forehead becomes so tender as to shrink from the slightest touch. Lee had, I am sure, treated his daughter's mind in much the same way. It was one naturally susceptible to religious impressions; and he had so belaboured it, so to speak, from the moment of its earliest development, with the harshest doctrines of the gloomiest school of religious fanaticism, that he was now able at will, by a few words, to cause her intense mental anguish, and to check the slightest tendency to stray from the way he willed her to go, or indulge in any exuberance of youthful spirits. I remember well the quaint but forcible terms in which I once heard the old crippled letter-carrier aforementioned express the general opinion of the village about the parson's treatment of his children. The maid-of-all-work—a very ancient maid, but tender of heart withal—made some pitying remark regarding their fragile and delicate appearance, to which old Joe took exception.

"They mun be toof (tough) uns," he said, "body and soul, or t' parson 'd had t' one in t' churchyard and t' other int' hell afore this."

Were poor Mary Lee to reappear before me in this my critical and cynical old age, perhaps she might seem to me nothing more than mortal; but she lives in my memory as the fairest and loveliest thing my eyes ever looked upon, a vision quite different in kind from the mere earthly beauties which have since attracted their languid admiration. She was, however, undoubtedly a very beautiful girl; but, as might have been expected from the unjoyous surroundings of her young life, of a pensive and somewhat melancholy cast of beauty. Nevertheless, on occasions when she was interested or excited, a charmingly sunny light would "dawn in the dark of her hazel eyes," and seem to dance and shine over her mobile features. And whatever want of habitual sprightliness there was in her countenance was made up for by a remarkable lightness and grace which characterised every movement of her exquisitely modelled figure. To see her tripping across a bleak moor, knee-deep in "ling," and bending forward to breast the unbroken force of a wild north-easter, showing no more sign of fatigue than a fairy dancing round a greensward ring; or to catch sight of her bounding down a rugged hillside, springing from one gray crag to another with the light and sure step of a mountain goat—was a thing to drive the most cynical to raptures and the most active to envy. It was engaged in some such exercise that I first set eyes upon her. And young and unobservant as I was, I was quite startled, when she came near, at the contrast between the light-hearted enjoyment of life, the overflow of animal spirits which had seemed to inspire every step with which the firmly-planted little feet had spurned the ground, and that sad, dreaming face, with its almost transparently fair complexion, relieved by tints as delicate as those in the veins of a blush-rose leaf.

The feelings with which Mary Lee regarded her father soon became as great a matter of wonder to me as this strange contradiction in her bodily characteristics. It is quite impossible that she can have loved him. None but a wife could have loved such a man. But the tenderness and watchful assiduity with which she performed her filial cares must have been inspired by a warmer feeling than a mere sense of duty. They were, in fact, I verily believe, inspired by love, though not by love of him. She sought a vent for the passionate affection and regret which, as I learnt when I came to know her well, from a hundred little circumstances, she felt for her dead mother, in lavishing on the harsh and unlovely object, to whom that mother had been blindly devoted, all those cares which she was no longer there to bestow.

If ever a girl dwelt among untrodden ways since Wordsworth's "violet by the mossy stone," it was Mary. Yet even she was not quite "a maid whom there were none to praise." Even the damp cheerlessness of the barely-furnished parlour at Slagby Parsonage was sometimes lighted up—like a marsh by a will-o'-the-wisp—with a little flickering flirtation. And there were some sequestered dells amongst the "dreary, dreary moorlands" around, through which Mary was not unfrequently in the habit of returning from her visits to the scattered cottages of her father's parish, which afforded a scene and an atmosphere where the spark could burn more freely and brightly than within the mildewed walls of the Parsonage.

Goldmore Hall, the spacious mansion built by the nabob, which was about six miles distant from Slagby, used always to be well filled, large as it was, by a numerous swarm of its founder's progeny. The Crovesworths were a prolific race; and the males had a habit of marrying two or three wives—not all at once, but in succession—a practice which did not tend to keep down the population of the Hall. At the time when Mr. Lee set up his staff at Slagby there was a certain young inmate domesticated at the Hall of whom I shall have much to say in the course of this story. He belonged to the Crovesworth family by descent, and was by temper, character, and personal appearance, the very exemplar and quintessence of the Crovesworths. But he did not bear their name. He was the son of the present squire's eldest daughter, and his name was George Steel. His father was dead; and his mother, on being left a widow, had returned to live in her father's house.

George Steel—or Mr. George, the name he was so exclusively known by amongst the neighbours and dependents of the family that many of them were probably actually ignorant of his surname—was a boy in the fifth form at Eton when Mary Lee came to Slagby. He had shown a brilliant promise of scholarship, and it was his taste in this direction which had first led him to the sequestered and uninviting Parsonage, which probably nine-tenths of the residents at Goldmore Hall had never so much as seen, even if they knew of its existence. He had found a difficulty in some classic writer whom he had taken up to amuse himself with during the holidays, and with an impatience and eagerness which were characteristic in him, he inquired right and left for some one in the neighbourhood able to help him. But classical erudition did not blossom very luxuriantly either amongst the county rectors of ——shire, or the solicitors and doctors of Puddleborough, the neighbouring market-town. The former were wont to spend most of their learned leisure in the science of ornithology, being especially diligent in the collection of specimens of partridges and pheasants. The latter were more prone to mathematical studies, and were never tired of making calculations for themselves, and setting problems for each other, in "the odds." So young Steel at first found very little help amongst the members of the three learned professions who were within his reach. But while he was lamenting the scholastic darkness in which his lines had fallen, his uncle, the rector, remembered Lee's old classical repute, and suggested to George that if he were not afraid to risk a rude rebuff from the curate, who was as truculent in his behaviour towards his superiors as he was cruel towards those whom Fate had placed in his power, he would find Mr. Lee *able* enough to assist him in his difficulty. The young student was too eager to be deterred by the risk of a harsh reception, and set off that very afternoon to Slagby.

As George Steel descended the precipitous path leading down a deep ravine that separated the wide upland over which he had ridden from the lower plateau on which the village stood, and looked upon that dreary landscape, and when he rode through the broken gateway, which there was no occasion to close for the purpose of keeping man or beast out of the uninviting wilderness of weeds to which it gave access, and when he caught sight of one little spot (just before Mary's bedroom window), where with pitiably small means an effort had been made to impart a touch of taste and care in the midst of the surrounding ugliness and neglect, it is not probable that his thoughts took a very far flight beyond the present and material inconveniences arising from the roughness of the road, the cutting chilliness of the wind, and the pungent odours of rotting vegetables heaped up by the side of the garden-path. But could he have looked into the future, that dreary scene, with its environment of bleak and barren hills, and its centre a garden of rank weeds, hard by the gloomy graveyard, the desolation of the spot rather made more dismal than brightened by the only little struggling sign of grace and order, might have seemed no unfit symbol of the lifelong results destined to follow for him from this casual visit.

By one of those unaccountable caprices, in which even the most consistently disagreeable persons sometimes prove that they are not wholly superior to the weakness of human nature, Mr. Lee, who never met his patron, the rector, without sending that rotund and rubicund ecclesiastic to the verge of apoplexy by some sarcastically insulting remark, received the nephew's uninvited visit quite blandly. The fact is, that if in the man's savage nature there was one taste which did not derive its allurement from the suffering of other people, it was the pleasure he took in the exercise of his extraordinary skill and erudition in the ancient classic languages. And he gladly hailed the opportunity of gratifying it by discussion with a kindred spirit, which his present place and mode of life but seldom afforded him. So he contented himself at the beginning of his interview with George Steel by a few bitter and somewhat coarse expletives regarding the hypocrisy and meanness of his young visitor's uncle, and a grating laugh or two at certain ridiculous displays of the reverend gentleman's ignorance in the pulpit and elsewhere, which he narrated as an appropriate topic whereby to enliven the conversation. After that he became most complacent in his willingness to expound the crabbed Greek text. And George Steel, being much more concerned about the curate's opinion regarding the writings and meaning of the defunct Aristophanes than respecting the sayings and doings of the living rector of Brahminster, thought it unnecessary to take any notice of the prefatory ebullitions of spleen.

So the two took to each other surprisingly, and spent a good couple of hours in learned discourse, during which Master Bob Lee, in the schoolroom below (for I had not then come under the discipline with which I was afterwards to be so familiar), enjoyed a most unusual respite from the strap of the post-bag.

Whether the pleasure of discussing Greek particles and criticising the style of Cicero might have induced young Steel to repeat his visit to the dingy Parsonage at the cost of a winter ride across the moors, under other circumstances, I cannot say. But it so chanced that as he left the house and mounted his nag, he caught sight of Mary Lee busy fastening up the tendril of a creeper over a little rustic arch which she had made in her own special corner of the garden. Now Steel, though delighting in more serious studies, was nevertheless by no means averse to the cultivation of those lighter arts, which are to be acquired by the perusal of "woman's looks." He therefore no sooner saw Mary than he walked without hesitation towards the trellis porch. She had just returned from a ramble in search of primroses, or from some errand in the village, and had a little basket on one arm. The huge brim of her straw hat, and the coarse stuff of her faded frock, could not obscure the delicate beauty of the girl's face, the rich profusion of her soft and waving hair, and the remarkable grace of a figure which, even at that usually most awkward and ungainly epoch of the growth of the female human animal—from fourteen to fifteen—was almost perfect. The young man's attention was naturally arrested. He made some complimentary remark with reference to the employment she was engaged in, and the slight blush which the unexpectedness of his appearance called up, and the sudden brightening of her countenance produced by a promise, with which he followed up his first address, to send her some flowers and cuttings from the Hall, made the child look lovelier than ever. As George Steel rode home, it is a remarkable circumstance that, although his thoughts did not once recur the whole way to the subject of his two hours' classical discussion with the curate, he became so impatient to renew it that he finally resolved to call again at the Parsonage the next day.

Before he returned to Eton, his visits to Dredgingham had become a regular routine. He went there at least twice a week; and poor Mary, to whom his five or ten minutes' talk with her in the garden as he left became the one pleasurable excitement in her dull days, was never out of the way. These five or ten minutes began, as the latter days of the holidays drew to a close, to expand till they passed first one hour, and then two. The classical discussions at the same time languished and contracted *pari passu*. Mr. Lee, however, did not take much notice either of the expansion in the one case or the abridgment in the other. The truth was, that Steel's intercourse with the Parsonage had at an early stage begun to be attended with another sort of gratification directly affecting the master of the house in a manner more material than the feasts of classic lore which had been its first chief concomitant. This assumed the shape of frequent baskets of fruit and vegetables, and occasional supplies of game. And so long as these continued, Mr. Lee was the less solicitous both as regards the curtailment of his own pleasure in the conversation of the young scholar and the prolongation of his daughter's.

During each succeeding vacation that George Steel spent at Goldmore Hall, his visits to Slagby were renewed and continued. And as he passed from a boy at Eton to a young man at Haileybury, and she from a child into budding womanhood, a corresponding change naturally took place in the motives and feelings which inspired their interviews. When I first came under the governance of Mr. Lee's ferule, or rather thong, Mary was sixteen, and would blush like a peony, and fly into the "rage of the turtle," and finally often burst out crying under the perpetual showers of not very delicately-veiled innuendoes, from her brother Bob and myself, concerning her "sweetheart," Mr. George.

What was the exact character of young Steel's feelings and views towards her at that time was a problem with which my youthful mind was not much exercised then, but which I have often thought over since. There was certainly on his part something much more serious than a mere flirtation. In the first place, he was much too thoughtful and good-natured to have trifled for mere amusement with the affections of a girl so peculiarly entitled by her solitary situation, without any one to advise or shield her, to the utmost consideration. And secondly, I can still recall little actions and overheard snatches of conversation, which, looked at in the light of matured experience, convince me that Steel's affections were really and deeply touched. But on the other hand, his ruling passion from his earliest youth was ambition; and he was—by nature and early discipline—cool, cautious, strong-willed, and self-denying. He must have told himself, if ever the thought of asking Mary Lee to be his wife arose in his mind, that such a marriage would be sheer ruin to all the dearest hopes of his life. Even if it were too late for his grandfather, the head of the powerful house of Crovesworth, to mark his displeasure by cancelling his appointment to the Bengal Civil Service, still, hampered with a beautiful but low-born wife, he would be received by the numerous band of high official kith, kin, and allies of his family in Calcutta very differently from what would be his welcome if he came unencumbered. And his career, chilled by the frost of official disapproval, might be expected to end in the seclusion of his shame in the swamps of Boggleywalla.

What, then, were his intentions towards this friendless and simple child I have never been able to decide to my own satisfaction. He had a high sense of honour, a kind and generous heart, and a firm will. But strong natures may be subject to still stronger passions, and I do not know how far the conflict and tumult of the rival passions of love and ambition in George Steel's breast may in those days of his hot youth have warped his disposition.

CHAPTER II.

MARY LEE MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE, AND HER FATHER BREAKS OFF WITH AN OLD ONE.

One day in the spring, while George Steel was away at Haileybury, Mary and I had a little adventure while we were out on a ramble. In the direction of the market-town, Puddleborough, the dreary character of the scenery about Slagby gradually assumed more varied and bolder features. The comparatively unbroken surface of the barren uplands gave way to deep valleys rich with cultivation, rolling hills clad with verdant meadow, and streams whose high banks were shaded by forests of foliage. We were passing along a footpath which skirted the edge of such a river-bank, where it was more than usually precipitous, and Mary's eye was caught by some wild-flowers a little way down. She uttered an exclamation of admiration, and of regret that they were out of reach. My boyish chivalry was aroused; and having in those happy days the activity of a monkey, and very little regard for the integrity of bones, which in fact were little more than gristle, I incontinently began to scramble down towards the coveted blossoms. In my efforts to reach them, however, my foot slipped, and down I went, sliding some thirty feet,—my vainly-clutching hands lacerated by brambles, one trouser-leg ripped up from ankle to waistband, and my straw hat left hanging on the branch of an ash-tree just midway in my rapid descent.

When my heels came down with a most tremendous jar, which nearly smashed all my teeth, and ought to have fractured the base of my skull, on the rocky ledge or narrow footpath which intervened between the bank and the stream I suppose I must have been stunned for a moment or two. I have a hazy idea of hearing Mary Lee's screams, which seemed to sound far away, some miles beyond Slagby; and in the wonderful whirligig of rivers, trees, rocks, and fields which valsed before my swimming eyes, there seemed to be one figure rather less rotatory than the rest—that of a man wading middle-deep in the water. As I came a little to myself, I saw this figure close beside me. But notwithstanding my accident, he appeared to be paying very little attention to me. He was looking straight up towards the top of the bank, gesticulating violently, and shouting,

"For Heaven's sake, stop; go back! He's all right—he's all right, I tell you; no harm done that the tailor can't cure. Go along to your right; there's a path a hundred yards along that will bring you down safe; you'll break your neck if you try to get down here—though, d—— it! I never saw such a sure foot, nor such a pretty pair of ankles either, for that matter—that's right; and I'll pick up the pieces of young jackanapes here meantime, and get them together for you by the time you come round. So, youngster! you've fallen on your feet like a cat. Lucky for you that small boys' brains don't weigh much, isn't it? or the thickness of your skull might have been tested by something harder than the ruler which, I suppose, is what it is most used to contact with."

From this address I gathered that Mary's first impulse had been to follow me down, and I felt grateful to the stranger for deterring her from the perilous attempt, though I was inclined to resent the flippancy with which he treated my catastrophe. With these conflicting predispositions towards him, I began more closely to examine his appearance while waiting for my companion's arrival. He certainly was not a gentleman, I thought, for his clothes were patched, and he wore a most disreputable old wide-awake hat. But yet there was an easy air of superiority in his bearing and manner which did not fit in with my notions of a "cad"—a term which, in my vocabulary of those days, comprised the whole world beyond the pale of gentility. He was a young man of not more than two or three and twenty—a tall, burly fellow, with a frank and pleasant but not handsome face. Whether it was that my faculties were muddled by my fall or not, I don't know, but certainly the man's appearance puzzled me. His face had an expression of genial good-humour, but crossed by a vein of contemptuous hauteur. His clear gray eye and healthy complexion seemed to argue a vigorous outdoor habit of life, and yet there was an indefinable air of dissoluteness about him. And though his words were jocular and his voice cheery, there was withal a decisiveness of utterance, a kind of harshness in its tone, which made one feel that it would be a very uncomfortable necessity to have to disobey any of its behests, or to do or say anything calculated to cause it to be raised in anger.

Mary's light step brought her down the path which the stranger had indicated in a very few minutes, and she stood beside us, panting and flushed with the speed at which she had run—her broad-leafed hat fallen back on her shoulders, and her hair disarranged, sweeping in a rippling cataract over it. I never saw her look more lovely. I watched her curiously, to catch some indication of what *she* thought of the stranger. The heightened colour—heightened above even the flush of active exertion—with which she dropped her eyelids before his glance of unconcealed surprise and admiration, convinced me in a moment that he had not been set down in *her* category of "cad." But her embarrassment did not overcome her eager anxiety for me. She stooped over me, and began at once tenderly to wipe the dust and blood from my scratched hands, and to adjust as much as was possible my still more cruelly lacerated garments, with no more thought of the ludicrous side of her labour than if we had been quite alone. And while so engaged she continued to soothe my shaken nerves with soft murmurs of pity and gentle reproach.

"O Frank! how can you be so rash and daring? My poor child—O, how dreadfully this poor little hand is torn! How I wish I had never seen those horrid flowers! I am always so thoughtless, so selfish; and, O, dear! your trou—we must try and get in without papa seeing us, and go straight up to my room; I shall be able to mend them so that it will never be seen."

I shook my head incredulously and disconsolately,

"Sha'n't I just catch the strap!"

Poor Mary shuddered at the grim suggestion, and her eyes filled with tears. This was too much for the stranger's feelings.

"What! Do you mean to say his father will thrash him when he sees the state he's in?" he exclaimed. "Surely the sight of the torn hands may be trusted to assuage the righteous anger engendered by the sight of the torn bags."

"Hands is nothing," answered I, with mysterious signification and a slight *soupçon* of contempt. "Mr. Lee thinks nothing of *hands* when it comes to whacking. And besides, he isn't my father."

"Well, whoever he is, if he whacks you to-day, just tell him with my compliments he ought to be whacked himself; and if he'll just look in at my place, I shall be happy to do it for him."

Mary's eye flashed angrily at this; and she replied, speaking to me, but pointedly at the irreverent utterer of the insulting invitation.

"What has happened has been very wrong, and quite deserves punishment. But it is *my* fault, and therefore, Frank, you need not fear that papa will punish you; or," she added falteringly, for her conscience could not put up with such a lie as she knew this assurance of hers to be—"or if he does, I am sure it will be because he thinks it for your good; and I—I shall suffer far more than you, Frank."

"O, if the gentleman in question be *your* father," said the stranger gallantly, "I feel no anxiety about young scapegrace here."

"Come, Frank," said Mary, taking my hand. "Let us hurry home, and I will try and set your clothes right; I have no doubt I shall be able to."

"Yes, perhaps," said I. "But how about my hat? There's no hope of getting it from where it has stuck up there."

This quite nonplussed Mary. She might stitch up my rent pantaloons, but could not make me a new hat. We looked at each other in blank despair.

"O, well, I can help you here," said the stranger. And without more ado, he climbed the nearly perpendicular bank with the greatest apparent ease, and chucked the hat down to me.

"Are those the flowers you wanted?" he then called out, pointing to those the desire to procure which for Mary had tempted me to destruction.

"Yes," she answered. "But O, don't attempt to get them. I don't want them a bit; I really don't. It was so silly of me to say a word about them. O, please don't go any higher. After one such merciful escape from death, it is wrong to tempt Providence."

But the stranger was deaf to the voice of the charmer, though she unquestionably charmed wisely; for the climb to the jutting point where the flowers grew was really a difficult and dangerous one—much more so, owing to the looseness of the earth, for the heavy man who was now attempting it than for my light frame. But he only laughed, and swinging himself from branch to rock, and scrambling through brushwood with a cat-like activity not to have been looked for in so burly a figure, he soon reached and plucked the flowers.

When he presented the prize to Mary with some pretty speech which I cannot remember, she repaid his exertions with a blush and a smile much more gracious than her previous demeanour. And encouraged, I suppose, by this, he suddenly expressed for the first time much solicitude for my condition, said I had had a terrible shaking, and might very likely faint on the way, and finally insisted on accompanying us homewards. Mary protested, and was, I think, really alarmed at the proposal. Indeed, had her father met her walking with a strange young man, I can imagine that his wrath would have been like a devouring flame of fire. But this young fellow, who was evidently not largely gifted with the grace of amenableness, would hear of no objection. In a jiffy he was up to his knees again in the stream, which he had crossed to come to my assistance, caught up the fishing-rod and creel, which I now for the first time perceived he had left on the farther bank, and overtook us before we had proceeded a hundred yards.

What the nature of the conversation was in the course of our three or four miles' walk to the top of the hill above Slagby, where he left us and turned back, I do not remember. My thoughts, in fact, were much absorbed in devising all sorts of utterly mendacious and extravagantly improbable stories to account for my tattered condition, in the forlorn hope of throwing dust into the glassy eyes of Mr. Lee, and baulking him and the post-bag strap of their destined prey. All I remember is that the dialogue was chiefly, almost wholly, sustained by the stranger; that much of it was spoken in such a low tone that I could have only caught a word here and there, even had I tried to listen; and that Mary's meagre contributions to it consisted of little beyond monosyllables and blushes, with now and then a little timid smile.

Amongst the numerous successful lies, and still more numerous thrashings, which crowd this period of my life, memory does not serve me well enough to enable me to state whether the lie shielded or the thrashing befell me on this particular occasion. Anyhow, after a couple of days at the outside, my thoughts never recurred again to our little adventure by the river—not till long afterwards at least. Indeed, if a hundred small occurrences had not hustled this one out of my mind, one happened only a few weeks later of such a startling character that it cleaned the tables of Bob's memory and mine, as with one broad sweep of a wet sponge, and in a moment

> "Wiped away all trivial, fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
> That youth and observation copied there."

About half a mile above the scene of my roll down the bank, the road to the town crossed the river by a stone bridge, by which in the old coaching days a main line of road had passed northwards, skirting the edge of our moorland tract. At a short distance, perhaps two or three furlongs, along this now little-frequented road stood a solitary house. It must originally have been one of those combined farm and public houses which one often finds by the side of a turnpike-road. But agriculture had vanished from the scene along with the mail-coaches, and now it had sunk into a beer-shop pure and simple—or rather simple only, for an odoriferous dust-heap, which flanked the front door-step on one side and was balanced by a cesspool on the other, interfered sadly with its claim to the qualification of purity. The farm-buildings and enclosure had long fallen into a mass of unsightly ruins; and broken windows and slateless roofs showed that the greater part of the house itself also was abandoned to the winds and rats. One room on the ground floor, however, still offered a not particularly luxurious and cheerful shelter to the weary traveller (usually of the tramp species) who might happen to require it, and served to make good the equivocal promise set forth on the battered signboard over the door, which bore the quaint title of The Good Intent.

This pot-house depended for a very meagre and precarious support, I imagine, on the custom of the miners, who would emerge thus far from their dens among the hills in the direction of the civilised world to boose away their wages on Saturday nights. On other days of the week a completer solitude than The Good Intent and its precincts it would have been difficult to find outside Selkirk's island. And it was this quality chiefly which led to my becoming familiar with the place. In a word, Bob Lee and I used to go there on half-holiday afternoons to taste the clandestine joys of smoking "screws" of exceedingly coarse tobacco, and swilling three-halfpenny "gills" of sweet muddy beer. The old hag, who was proprietress and sole inhabitant of this house of entertainment, had always been wont to receive us with a grim sort of affability, and had more than once been so considerate as to give us a hint when, on rare occasions, our visits to her house had happened to be made at inauspicious times, when there chanced to be some one in the sanded parlour who might have carried the news thereof to Mr. Lee.

Much to my surprise, therefore, one afternoon, when Bob and I, clay pipes in mouth, approached her door in the trustful anticipation of enjoying our ease at our inn, Mrs. Potts met us on the step with the aspect of a virago.

"Git 'long, you nasty, dirty beasts—makin' chimblies o' your filthy little mouths!' was her elegant address of welcome. "You shall not come with your stinking pipes into my house. I'm just goin' to Slagby this very day, and see if I don't tell t' parson of your coming here and wanting me to give you beer, you drunken little varmints!

I'll warrant he'll give you what'll turn your stomachs at the very name of beer for the next year to come. There! git along home with you, or I'll be there before you!"

We recoiled in confusion from this unexpected assault, wondering greatly that the treachery of woman could attain to such depths of baseness. We hastily plunged our still lighted pipes into our trousers-pockets, and hurried precipitately down the road. But the spirits of boys, if not very steadfast, are elastic; and ere we had gone many yards, we had so far recovered from our perturbation as to take note of a fine setter which lay basking in the sun a short way from the house. Assuredly Mrs. Potts had never owned such a dog, and was not by any means likely to have lately purchased it, or received it as a present. She certainly might have stolen it, could there have been any conceivable means by which its acquisition could have profited her. But as the fancy of the neighbouring miners, who were the only persons to whom she could have hoped to dispose of it, lay exclusively in the direction of bull-terriers, this supposition was also quite out of the question. No; the dog's presence outside The Good Intent forced Bob and me to the irresistible inference that there must be some very unwonted guest inside. Curiosity mastered fear. And no sooner did we satisfy ourselves that Mrs. Potts had retired from her place of observation on the doorstep, than we proceeded to execute a flank movement, and, reapproaching the house under cover of the ruined farm-buildings, began cautiously to reconnoitre the premises. But Mrs. Potts was more vigilant than we counted on, and presently sallying out from the back-door, armed with a broomstick, finally put us to rout. As we retired, and, when once quite safe beyond the radius of the broomstick, paused and avenged ourselves with a few Parthian arrows selected with care from our youthful vocabularies of what my Indian friends would call "gâli," she repeated more emphatically and vindictively than before her threat of at once going off to betray us to the parson. But we laughed at this, astutely calculating that our coppers were too valuable in her eyes to allow her to take a course which must necessarily cut her off from the receipt of them for ever thereafter. In short, we trusted, as older and wiser persons might have done, to avarice to check the impulses of rage. But the result proved the danger of reckoning without our hostess of The Good Intent.

Baulked in our original plan for the enjoyment of our half-holiday, we had nothing left to do but to enjoy the less exciting pleasure of a ramble over a country where there were no turnips to steal and eat raw, no farmhouses with hens to stone, scarcely any cottages where we could call for a drink of water, and, while the good woman went to fetch it, chuck a pill-box full of gunpowder into the kitchen fire and bolt—in a word, through a country singularly devoid of objects of interest.

The course of our desultory wanderings led us homewards by a way that we had very rarely, if ever, gone before. As we entered an especially sequestered and sheltered little glen, and were just congratulating ourselves on the unexpected discovery, in convenient proximity to the Parsonage, of a spot which seemed formed by kindly Nature as a retreat for boys to smoke in, play with gunpowder, and enjoy undisturbed other suchlike surreptitious delights, we suddenly caught sight of the fluttering of a white petticoat.

"By gum!" exclaimed one.

"Crikey!" ejaculated the other. And both set off at full speed in chase of the vision as it vanished round the shoulder of the hill. As we, too, rounded the corner, we distinctly saw a figure—not in a petticoat—spring over a clump of brushwood which skirted the path, and disappear down the hillside. The next moment we overtook Mary Lee, looking very flushed and flurried.

"Aha! we have caught you this time!" said I.

"O yes, Miss Prim!" chimed in Bob. "She's always preaching at me for smoking and telling lies to the governor; and she goes out with a basket of medicine for a sick old woman, and meets her sweetheart by the way. Won't I just tell dad! and see if he ever lets Mr. George into the house again! Didn't you see his arm round her waist, Frank?"

"O yes, and you know we heard a kiss—an awful smack!"

And so we continued our pleasant banter, finding immense fun in poor Mary's too evident distress. Having exhausted our wit, we ran on homewards and left her to follow, with the comfortable assurance that we should have told the whole story to her father by the time she arrived. Standing in the front doorway, on our arrival at the Parsonage, we saw, somewhat to our surprise, Mr. George himself, looking very glum.

"Where is your sister, Bob?" he inquired. "She never *used* to go out at this time. What has happened now, that I scarcely ever find her at home? Where does she go?"

"O, I like that!" we both replied derisively.

"What do you mean?"

"O, don't think we didn't see you; you weren't quite sharp enough for *us*."

"We'd been watching them the last half-hour, hadn't we, Bob?"

"Yes, I should think we had; and wasn't it fun? weren't they cuddling up close to each other, just?"

At this, Mr. George made a sudden dash and caught one of us by the scruff of the neck; and presently a good shaking elicited a more truthful and connected account of what we actually had witnessed. Mr. George looked as black as thunder, and walking inside, sat down moodily in the parlour, probably to await Mary's return.

We were just beginning to question each other in whispers as to what all this might mean, when our thoughts were violently wrenched in quite another direction. The bell of Mr. Lee's study was rung, the one servant of the establishment entered it, and presently reëmerged, called out to Bob that he was wanted by his "Pa," and then led the way towards the kitchen, followed by—O, how my heart seemed to sink like a lump of lead into the very nethermost regions of my body at the sight!—by Mrs. Potts!

It turned out that that treacherous person had been as good as her word on this occasion, or rather half as good. For while telling Mr. Lee of Bob's smoking and going to her house for beer, she had omitted to mention the fact of my having accompanied him. The fact probably was that Bob had a much richer vocabulary of abusive epithets than I could command, and this had probably caused her vindictive wrath to be concentrated against him.

My playfellow had not been many minutes in the study, ere the shrill vocal music of the parson's reprobatory eloquence began to receive an instrumental accompaniment. Whack, whack! sounded the strap of the post-bag; and I—painfully ignorant as yet of Mrs. Potts' unlooked-for reticence—felt my shoulders tingle with anticipatory sympathy at each reverberation. Then followed a silence of perhaps ten minutes, only broken now and then by the faint sound of a smothered sob. I well knew the meaning of this, for it was one of the parson's usual tender mercies to commute a portion of every sentence of corporal punishment for a penal task, to be learnt and said on the spot. As he always selected some utterly impracticable irregular Greek verb, or hopeless bit of cramped construing, the substituted task, undertaken with nerves quivering from the strap, eyes blinded with tears, and mind agitated by terror, was of course never learnt in the few minutes he allowed for it; and so in the end he got an excuse not only for finishing the original flogging, but for adding another as a punishment for obdurate impenitence. My only surprise on the present occasion was, that I had not been called in to receive my first instalment of the strap while Bob was engaged in his imposition, so that the spectacle of my execution might further distract his attention.

In due time the shrill harsh voice of reproach was again uplifted, and I knew that Bob was attempting to say the lesson, and blundering hopelessly in the second line; then came another briefer pause; that, too, was terribly significant to me, and will be presently understood by the reader. Then *whack* came the strap again; but there was a distinct difference in its music this time, and the first note was followed by yells of agony and terror.

Just then Mr. George came out from the parlour and passed me with great strides towards the study, looking blacker than ever. He flung open the door and entered. I followed him, curiosity overcoming fear. The picture which met our sight is as clear to my mind's eye now, after the lapse of some thirty years, as if I had seen it yesterday.

In the further corner of the squalidly-furnished room, beneath a festoon of mildewed green and white wall-paper which the damp had detached from the wall, and which hung above his head like a canopy, standing on a rickety chair—a feat requiring some address to avoid slipping down through the hiatus which now occupied three-quarters of the area of what had once been the rush-bottomed seat—was Bob Lee. His jacket lay on the table, having been removed for the purposes of the first instalment of his flogging. But the second edition had called for more elaborate preparations; and another portion of his habiliments—that portion which is commonly regarded as most especially *propria quæ maribus*—was fallen from its high estate, and hung grovelling in ignoble folds around his ankles.

Opposite to him, with his back towards the door, so that we only got a quarter-view of his face, stood the boy's father. Mr. Lee was a tall, raw-boned man. The general *effect* of his countenance—a most repellent and disagreeable effect—I can recall to myself vividly, but my memory does not enable me to describe the features. The only detail that I do remember is that the nose—a very red one, not rosy with the genial glow of Bacchus, but raw-red, as if it had been flayed—had a protuberance which I can liken to nothing but a bony *knuckle* in the middle of its outline. One of his great sinewy hands grasped the dread post-bag strap, with the buckle end hanging down, and trembling as if with the intensity of bloodthirsty impatience. The other, with the forefinger outstretched, was employed to add emphasis to the shrill tones of the denunciation by which Mr. Lee, quite unnecessarily, and indeed futilely, endeavoured to add terror to the pangs of Bob's physical sufferings. At the moment of our entrance he seemed to be imparting an artistic touch all his own to the bald statement of Mrs. Potts' accusation—which I cannot suppose had gone beyond a charge of drunkenness and the profligacy of tobacco-smoking—by quite a Pauline picture of imputed enormities which poor Bob had never heard of, nor could comprehend, finished off by a few pleasant details of the consequences thereof, which the child must look forward to in the spirit at no distant date, when his debaucheries should have hurried his prematurely exhausted body into an early grave.

"But hopeless though the task may be," concluded the good parson, as Mr. George paused for a moment in amazement at the odd sight so suddenly presented to him, "hopeless as it is, I will not shrink from it. While there is the barest chance that, by the severest pain which I can inflict on my son's worthless fleshy tabernacle, I can purchase the immunity of his immortal soul from the slightest of the pangs of eternal torment, verily I will not lay up for myself against that day the bitter reproach that I spared for his crying."

And so saying, he raised the strap above his shoulder, and took a stride forward. Bob set up a yell of despair. But before the thong could descend upon the child's person, Mr. George stepped between.

"I have no doubt," he said, "that you are the best judge of the kind of discipline your own flesh and blood requires, Mr. Lee, but let me tell you that you forget yourself when you indulge in these disgusting proceedings while *I* happen to be in your house."

The old parson's eye flashed fire, and his nose grew livid with rage. But he answered with a sneer which resembled a snarl;

"You are stepping a little beyond the privileges of your family, young man. Nobody, of course, expects one of the Crovesworth kin to pay for an accommodation which, by any means, he can obtain gratuitously; and you would indeed have been a degenerate scion of that estimable house, and a most unworthy nephew of your revered uncle, my generous patron, if you had failed to take advantage of my presence here to obtain instruction in the classical languages without payment. But not even your uncle has ever ventured—"

"You insolent vagabond!" interrupted young Steel, whose habitually equable temper had evidently been unwontedly ruffled that day, "send in your bill and it shall be paid. I promise you shall never see me under this roof again. My too condescending kindness, I find, has not been appreciated by this family. But while I *am* here, I will not be insulted by an exhibition of brutality. So lay down that strap."

As Mr. Lee did not obey this last somewhat peremptory command with the promptitude which his young visitor apparently thought proper on the occasion, the latter stretched forth his hand as if to assist in carrying out his own behest. But the old savage's blood was up, and ere Steel's fingers could touch the strap, it was raised with the rapidity of lightning, and the next moment, before the other, surprised at the utterly unexpected suddenness of the action, could make a motion to defend himself, it fell with a resounding *smack*, not upon Bob's shrinking person, but right across the cheek of George Steel.

The uproar which ensued may be better imagined than described. Indeed, I was so startled and amazed by the sight of a personal conflict between two individuals whom, each according to his kind, I had been accustomed to regard with much awe, that I have a most confused idea of what occurred. There was a struggle; and I remember that when the battle was over, and I was able to contemplate the scene with some composure, the study table was discovered in a sad condition, with a broken back. Mr. Lee, though advanced in years, was still a powerful muscular man; and Mr. George, albeit wiry, athletic, and a very neat hand with the gloves, was small and slight of build, and he must have had pretty nearly as much as he could manage to master his furious antagonist. He had, I think, wrenched the strap away, and whether he had any intention of avenging his own insult, along with many a bitter wail that had gone up to the ceiling of that room from my throat and Bob's, I don't know, when Mary Lee burst into the room and flung herself between them.

Her interposition necessarily put an end to the actual breach of the peace. Mr. George could not well pommel Mr. Lee over his daughter's shoulders; and the parson was materially trammelled in his efforts to get at young Steel, by having Mary clinging round his waist. But the war of words uprose again on the lull of that of hands; and poor Mary, far from mitigating, considerably aggravated this, adding screams and prayers to the defiances and imprecations of the two men. At last the hubbub was brought to an end by Steel striding out of the room, repulsing with wrathful disdain a timid attempt which the poor girl made to appease him. He roughly pushed away the little white hand, which she tried to lay on his arm, with some not complimentary remark about "fawning falsehood," and so took his leave of Slagby Parsonage, under the roof of which so large a portion of his time had been passed, and his fancy had doubtless still oftener lingered, during the past few years.

CHAPTER III.

MARY HAS TWO STRINGS TO HER BOW, BUT THEY GET TWISTED.

Mr. George Steel's behaviour in this affair lowered him very greatly in my estimation. The shaking and all the hard words he had bestowed on the tyrant Lee of course commanded my unqualified admiration, and I think that filial feeling did not altogether suppress a sense of grateful satisfaction with this part of his proceedings even in the breast of Bob Lee. But his treatment of Mary aroused my indignation. What right had he to call her false and behave rudely to her, only because her father had annoyed him, and that, too, just after we had caught him making love to her?

So when Mary the same evening, after I had gone to bed, came up to my room, and begged me to get up very early next morning and take a message for her to Goldmore Hall, I protested warmly.

"He is a nasty, ill-tempered sneak, Mary," I said, "and I wouldn't have anything more to say to him. He doesn't deserve it. You ought to have a better sweetheart than him, Mary."

Mary blushed, and looked pained and troubled. But she again earnestly pressed her request upon me.

"It is all nonsense about sweethearts, Frank. But don't you know that if Mr. George's uncle hears of what has happened to-day, he will turn papa away from here? and—and"—she added, clasping her hands tightly together, as her eyes filled with tears—"I know that if we had to return to the terrible hard life we led before we came here, it would kill papa; and O! to see Bob, too, starving for want of food! In pity, Frank, if you love me, get Mr. George to come to me."

"But where will you see him, if he comes? He can't come to the house now."

"No; say I will meet him somewhere, at whatever hour he fixes. Let me see, where will be the best place?"

"Why not the place where Bob and I saw him with you yesterday, just before the row occurred?" I suggested.

"Nonsense, child; you did not see him—at least, never mind. No; that is too far off; papa might suspect. No; say in the churchyard, if he can come after dusk."

I performed my errand, getting up noiselessly at four o'clock in the morning for the purpose, as I had a twelve miles' walk. As it was, I could not get back in time for breakfast, and got a thrashing. But as it was incurred in Mary's service, I did not mind that. I had some difficulty in getting speech of Mr. George, and found him in what I should have described in those days as a very grumpy humour. In the end, he consented to keep the appointment proposed by Mary; but this was not until after he had cross-questioned me over and over again as to whether any of the young gentlemen in the neighbourhood had lately taken to coming to Slagby, and also about Mary's habits of late, and particularly her walks, her visits to the cottages at a distance from the Parsonage, and so forth. He evidently received my answers with great suspicion; and especially eyed me most distrustfully when I made some allusion to his meeting with Mary in the dell, which Bob and I had interrupted the previous day.

On my way homewards I puzzled my wits as to what all this questioning might mean. And when I came to think of it, I remembered, though I had not noticed it before, that for a long time past Mary Lee had become very assiduous in her visits of charity to certain outlying cottages, and also that she used to select for these visits the morning hours, when her father and we boys were always closely engaged in our lessons. And this was quite contrary to her former habits, as she had been used to spend that time in her domestic duties indoors. It also dawned upon me now as a remarkable circumstance, that during the present vacation Mr. George had over and over again called at the Parsonage and found Mary out, a coincidence which had somehow been of very rare occurrence during former periods of his stay at Goldmore Hall.

The perspicacious reader, of course, anticipates the explanation of all this. But it was not until several weeks later that my unsophisticated eyes were opened. Meanwhile Mary had evidently been able to lull George Steel's suspicions to rest; for I was now frequently employed to convey messages and letters from one to the other, and they had several secret meetings. Curiosity induced me to attend at one of these, though, it may perhaps be needless to remark, a natural feeling of delicacy prevented my obtruding my presence very prominently on their notice. In short, I hid behind a bush. And what I then saw and heard assured me, as I now think the matter over, that whatever want of depth of earnestness there may have been in Mr. George's feelings towards Mary while the course of his flirtation was unruffled by any obstacle, they had quite changed their character under the combined influence of jealousy and opposition. Every word, every tone, every gesture of the passionate prayer which I heard him breathe, showed that he was now swept away in a fierce torrent of love, from the overwhelming waves of which he was helpless to save her or himself, ambition, fortune, or even honour. Mary listened with proper maidenly demureness, gently rebuked his impetuous ardour, and reiterated again and again the unpalatable recommendation to "patience." But she certainly used no such decisive phrase or manner in her reply as altogether to forbid hope. Yet that night I lay awake and heard her sobbing in her room next mine till long past midnight.

More than once after that I heard these sad vigils again; and indeed I think it likely that I might have heard them every night had I been awake. In the daytime, too, Mary seemed to have lost all the brightness which, as I have said, was wont not unfrequently to irradiate the pensive expression which her countenance always wore in repose—not even a fitful ray of sunshine ever burst forth now. This depression of spirits, whatever may have been its source, of course, ere long, told upon her health,

"And chased the native beauty from her cheek,
And she did look as hollow as a ghost."

At last she fell seriously ill. Had George Steel been then at Goldmore Hall, I think it probable that this illness might have brought his relations towards Mary herself and her father to a decisive issue. In the frame of mind he was in he would assuredly never have consented to be kept away from his darling while her life was in danger, and the result of an attempt on his part to see her must on her recovery have been either her decisive rupture of all connection with him, or her being cast off by her father, and flying to George's arms as the only refuge open to her. But—happily or unhappily, who shall venture to say?—George had by this time returned to Haileybury.

I was rather surprised at the effect which Mary's illness had on her father's conduct towards her. His grief and anxiety during its crisis were unmistakably genuine, and almost moved one to pity him; and he watched over her sick-bed with something which approached tenderness.

My grief, too, was acute and sincere, and many a bitter tear I shed while her life was trembling in the balance. But the grief of youth is seldom of a monopolising kind; and mine, I must confess, did not prevent my taking advantage of the confusion in the household, Mr. Lee's preoccupation, and the consequent absence of risk of detection, to seek a renewal of the delights, untasted since the fatal day of Mr. George's last visit, of drinking muddy beer, smoking rank tobacco, and spitting into a saucer filled with sawdust, just like a grown-up miner. So I repaired once more to The Good Intent.

At the same time that I reached the door a spring-cart was driven up to it from the opposite direction. As soon as it drew up, a tall man, who had been seated by the driver, got down, preceded by a setter dog, which sprang from the rug at his feet; the boy who had driven was proceeding to get a portmanteau out from behind, when Mrs. Potts rushed out from the door, and accosted the arrival in a manner almost as little like the usual cordial welcome of a bland hostess as had been her last greeting to Bob and me.

"What has brought you back here, Mr. Pearson?" she cried. "Why couldna you stop cannily at home? You're a free and a punctual score settler, as I wish all was as comes to The Good Intent; but poor lone widow as I am, and hard as it is to earn the bite and sup to keep body and soul together in this weary public-line, I wish I might never see you nor the colour of your money again!"

The traveller answered in a low and "mumbled" voice, probably in order that his words might not be overheard by the driver of the vehicle behind him.

"It is useless talking, mother; I *could not* keep away. Why did no answer come from her to my letter? did you deliver it?"

"And far better for ye both that there should be no answers, nor letters neither," replied the landlady, evading a direct reply to the final query. "Now be a good lad, put your portmanty back in the trap, and trot your ways home again. Let the poor lass be; no good can come to her o' keeping company with you. And folks say she might have one of the young Crovesworth lads—"

But here the traveller interrupted with a growled curse.

"Anyhow," resumed Mrs. Potts tartly, apparently incensed at his want of good manners, "you'll not see her now, for I heard tell that she's bad of the fever, and is just laid up in bed."

"Ill! ill, is she?" exclaimed the man, in agitation, "while I, like a wretched fool, have been wasting time in—" Here he caught sight of me standing at a little distance, and at once springing towards me, said eagerly, "Here, youngster, tell me about Miss Lee; is it true that she is ill? what is her illness? has she been— Is she in any danger? D—n you, can't you speak!"

Even before he accosted me I had recognised the fisherman who had come to my help when I fell over the bank. But he was much changed. The careless, easy, supercilious look and manner had quite disappeared; his brow was now moody, troubled—darkened by the "winter of discontent." I answered his questions, telling him that Mary Lee had been for some days most dangerously ill, but was now in a fair way towards recovery. Our interview ended by his going inside the house and writing a letter, which he charged me to deliver with the utmost secrecy to her. And thus it befell that I got myself into the interesting but equivocal position of an emissary between a young lady and both her rival lovers!

However hard your judgment on poor Mary's duplicity may be, do not set her down as a mere coquette. I am perfectly sure that she was not playing fast and loose with either of the men from frivolity or wantonness, qualities which were utterly foreign to her nature. But she had been lured into a situation of terrible perplexity. What her feelings at this particular juncture of her brief story may have been towards each of the two—George Steel and the so-called Pearson—I can only conjecture. She had been really, though perhaps not very passionately, attached to Steel, the dear and kind friend of her girlhood. But

> "Even as one heat another heat expels,
> Or as one nail by force drives out another,"

this first affection must have been temporarily swept away by the violent love inspired in her romantic and inexperienced breast by the man who had so accidentally crossed her path. To this overmastering passion she had undoubtedly for a time completely given herself up; and here was her fault. That her love for Pearson afterwards flickered and grew dim—perhaps went right out—almost as rapidly as it had flared up, there is good reason to believe. And as it did so, as disappointment and bitterness succeeded to wild hope and fond trust, her wounded heart turned again with vain regretfulness towards the slighted resting-place of its earlier love. But what stage of this double progress and revulsion of feeling had been reached at the time of her illness, and of my second meeting with Pearson, I have no means of knowing.

This is my own view, a merely conjectural one, as I have stated. Another person, who long afterwards took the deepest interest in her story, which he learnt from me, inclined to the conclusion that there was never anything beyond the girlish partiality of a maiden fancy free towards George Steel; that after the storm-wave of her real passion for Pearson had passed over her, it would have been a sheer impossibility for this partiality to be revivified, even into the palest ghost of love, but that she simulated a continued affection for Mr. George, as the only means of withholding him from punishing the gross insult laid upon him by her father, by effecting his ejection from the Slagby curacy, which, as she herself had said to me, would have meant starvation or the workhouse for them all.

Between these two theories the reader may make his own choice when the whole of the little drama—now fast approaching its *dénouement*—of Mary Lee's life, her fancies, her errors, her sufferings, and her sore perplexities, is before him.

Mary's recovery from her illness was rapid, being much helped by an act of kindness on the part of a good old lady who lived some few miles from Slagby,—probably the only disinterested and unharmful friend the poor girl ever knew,—who somehow heard of her lonely lot, her beauty, and her delicacy, and took compassion on her. This lady induced the curate to allow his daughter to accompany her in a short visit to the seaside. And Mary returned home wonderfully improved in health, so that by the time that Christmas brought young Steel back again to Goldmore Hall, she had returned to her old habits of vigorous outdoor exercise, though, alas! she had not regained the old elasticity of step; and the brightness which had been wont to light up her face, with a radiance all the more enchanting for the unfrequency and passing duration of its gleams, had set for ever.

The merry Christmas-tide—some faint glimmer of the festive influence of which, I suppose, lighted up even the dismal wastes of snow which wrapt the moors of Slagby, though I don't know from personal experience, as I returned to more genial climes for the holidays—the Christmas-tide, however, had passed, and winter in all its rigour, unmitigated by any sentimental associations, had settled down on the dreary landscape. The snow had melted, except in obscure crevices, where it lay, enhancing, by contrast, the blackness of the heather all around. The brooks, which at other seasons rippled over their pebbly beds with a pleasant murmur, now rolled down their swollen streams with a sullen moan or an angry roar. I had come back to Slagby even sadder than the change from the pleasant social life at home to that grim abode of solitude, hard fare, and tyranny usually made me. Perhaps, young as I was, instinct gave me a presentiment that the complications which had gathered round the only person whose presence and whose kindness had brightened the dreary days of my life there, must soon end in some dreadful catastrophe.

A few days before Mr. George had to return to Haileybury, he met—not altogether accidentally, I take it—Mary and me, while we were out walking together, and bade her "good-bye." I kept a discreet distance behind, while they walked on side by side, talking earnestly. But though I could not hear, I could see that the conversation was agitating, almost stormy. It was surely not occupied only by the tender and sweetly sad farewells of two trustful, hopeful lovers. Their motions, and the tones of the few broken words which the fitful wind bore back to my ears, told me that neither reproach nor recrimination was wanting to the dialogue. They parted at last, however, with an embrace. Steel, mounting his horse, rode away, and Mary turned and came towards me. Her eyes seemed fixed on vacancy, her lips were hard set, and her step was irregular, almost tottering.

"May God have mercy upon me!" she said, as she joined me; though of my presence she seemed from all appearance to be hardly conscious.

We walked some way homewards in silence. But when we got to where a path turned off, leading towards the little dell where Bob and I had surprised Mary and (as we supposed) George Steel on the eventful day of the latter's quarrel with her father, she abruptly stopped and told me to go home alone. I obeyed and walked on; but I felt a misgiving of something wrong, and after looking back and seeing her disappear hurriedly down the path, I paused. I did not dare to follow her, for there was something in her strange demeanour which frightened me. But still I could not make up my mind to go home and leave her, so I remained in uncertainty where I was.

I had not stood there many minutes when whom should I see coming towards me but Mr. George. He was on foot again. What was he coming back for, and where had he left his horse? My curiosity was excited, and ere he caught sight of me, I hid behind a bush. When he reached the spot where the path which Mary had taken turned off the road, he stopped, looked closely on the ground, and then, with a start and with a quickened pace, took his way down the path. Either his suspicions had been aroused during his farewell interview with her, or—what I think is more probable—he had, lover-like, been unable to tear himself away from her, and had come back, either in hopes of catching sight of her, or merely for the gratification of taking a last look at the house where she was, when his attention was casually attracted to her footprints on the miry road, turning away from the direct way to her home, whither he supposed her to have gone.

I felt sure Mary had gone to meet Pearson, and unless she could be warned, a rencontre exceedingly painful to her would take place between the rival lovers. Mary's double-dealing with respect to them had long been a source of distress to me. It jarred against the somewhat loose and capricious, but none the less cogent, notions which were comprised in my code of honour in those days. But I was loyal to her, nevertheless, and, when I saw her danger, I did not hesitate a moment. There was a short cut through a ravine to the spot where I supposed Mary and Pearson to be. I scrambled down, climbed up the further side, looked hastily back when I regained the footpath, and saw Mr. George striding along it, still a couple of hundred yards off. I dashed onwards at full speed, and presently came in sight of those I sought.

The tall and powerful figure of Pearson was standing with Mary's fragile form clinging closely to it. His head was bent downwards, but rather, as it seemed, in moody thought than to look with fond affection into her upturned face. One hand held hers, and the other arm was round her waist, but it seemed to rest there listlessly. Both were fully absorbed by their own respective emotions, and paid no heed to me, though I even called out to them as I approached. They did not become aware of my presence until I was quite close to them, and in the mean while I caught the following fragment of their dialogue.

"— Your unreasonable impatience, ruin—sheer ruin, I tell you, to me, and to you too. Have some patience. Do not be so madly, so selfishly impetuous. What harm can there be in a short delay?" This was spoken in Pearson's deep voice, in whose tones the peculiar hard ring which I always noticed in it appeared to me stronger than ever.

"Ah, Jim! you cannot have the heart to betray me!"

Ere he could reply to this appeal, uttered in a voice inexpressibly pathetic in its pleading reproach, every syllable of which thrilled—ay, and even now, as I write them down, seems to thrill again to my very soul—each one of which must have pierced, like a poisoned arrow, to the heart of the man to whom they were spoken, and rankled there with the torments of hell for many a long year after—ere he could reply, he caught sight of me. Three hurried words were enough to explain the danger. Mary tore herself from his arms and hastened to escape; while Pearson, drawing himself together with a look of angry determination, which should have warned any one less devoid of discretion than a jealous lover to keep out of his way, advanced slowly in the direction from which George Steel now appeared in sight.

The two men met, and Steel halted in the middle of the narrow pathway.

"A word with you, sir, if you please," he said.

"I am in a hurry—a great hurry—and can't stay at present," answered Pearson. "Out of the way and let me pass. Do you hear?" he added angrily, as the other still confronted him.

"I daresay you *are* in a very great hurry," said Steel sarcastically. "People who play your game frequently are. In such a very great hurry, indeed, that it is sometimes hard to overtake them. Therefore, your very great hurry is only an additional reason for my detaining you now that I have been lucky enough to catch you; so the extremely urgent business which demands your presence elsewhere must, I am sorry to say, suffer a postponement of ten minutes or so at least."

"What the deuce do you mean?" said Pearson. "But at all events, the delay need not, I trust, be quite so long as the time you mention. Ten seconds, I take it, will amply suffice for chucking you, neck and crop, into the brook, if you don't at once stand aside; and I know of nothing else which is likely to detain me."

"Possibly; but all in due order, if you please," answered Steel dryly. "And first I must have a word of explanation with you. You have just parted from a young lady whom, by some means or other, you have decoyed into meeting you here. You need attempt no denial: I know it as a fact."

"Well?"

"And I find that you have been prowling about this neighbourhood for some weeks past, lurking in a low public-house or beer-shop—a fit lodging, doubtless, considering the blackguard purpose—"

"Come, come! Such big words don't suit such a little man," said Pearson, who at the same moment caught Mr.

George by the shoulder with the purpose of pushing him aside. But the latter stood firmer on his legs than his slight figure had led his opponent to expect. And Pearson, instead of being able to jerk him out of the way, found the tables suddenly turned on him, and Steel's small bony fist planted with unlooked-for promptitude, vigour, and accuracy right between his eyes. The next moment they were both at it in good old English style.

George Steel was evidently a practised boxer, and even against so tall and powerful an antagonist as Pearson not only held his own, but at the first had the decided advantage. I remember in one of Marryat's novels how the plucky captain of a little brig is described as bombarding a first-rate fortress, one of the big guns of which could have blown his cockle-shell out of the water with a single shot—if only it could have had a fair shot at it. But the captain ran his tiny craft so close under the massive bastions that the cannon could not be sufficiently depressed to reach it, and all the shots flew harmlessly over the rigging.

Steel adopted much the same tactics as this captain. He pressed close up to Pearson, and darted his well-aimed blows into his face from under his guard. But Pearson had one single advantage which the fortress in Marryat's story lacked. The fortress was obliged to stand still where it was, whereas Pearson could step back. He did so, but for some time to no purpose, for his active opponent followed him up quicker than he could retreat. But at last he did succeed in getting one fair blow at Steel's chest, which checked the latter's advance for a single moment. This was enough. Once the giant had him at arm's length it was all over. Pearson's ponderous fist fell thundering through Steel's scientific, but, alas! too feeble, guard. He stood up gallantly for about a minute longer, but staggering sadly; and at last one tremendous facer sent him sprawling on his back, with force enough to have fractured his skull. And then he lay motionless.

What might have been Pearson's behaviour to his fallen foe, as soon as the fray was over, had he been left to follow his own impulse, I cannot say. But before he had time to realise what had happened, we heard a hoarse voice close behind us exclaiming,

"T' dommed coward, to hit a mon half his soize! But we'll soon tackle un." And looking round, I saw two stalwart miners running up.

Pearson apparently had no stomach for further fighting, and against odds, that day, for he turned quickly, and ran off at a pace which soon left his heavy-limbed pursuers hopelessly behind. One soon desisted from the chase, and turned to the easier task of assisting Steel. The other followed a little farther. But whether he wasted his breath in bawling out a continuous volley of objurgations, or whether he thought there might be more profit, as certainly there would be less danger, in assisting his comrade to raise the vanquished combatant than in chasing the victor by himself, his pursuit was not very hot, and he too presently gave it up.

Mr. George soon recovered consciousness, and picked himself up, shaking off the officious assistance of the miners and myself not over graciously. And then, throwing them a shilling, he walked off in silence.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD STORY.

"When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And finds, too late, that men betray."

Mary Lee questioned me closely on my return home as to what had occurred at the unlucky meeting of her two lovers, and I had to give her a full account of the fight. She was terribly agitated; indeed, she gave way to a wild paroxysm of despair, which I must say my unsophisticated intellect could by no means comprehend the meaning of.

"Which of the two do you like, Mary?" I asked, in innocent perplexity. "Why don't you send the other about his business, and save yourself all this distress? Get rid of that Pearson. I don't like him at all. I think he is a great villain!"

"Hush, hush, Frank dear! You cannot understand. O, mercy, mercy! would—would that I were dead!'

I could get nothing from her but this, and so gave up the attempt, and went away to distract my painful thoughts by a game of marbles with Bob.

Nothing particular occurred for the next three or four days, though, as I closely watched Mary's motions, I observed that she continued to slip out of the house for a few minutes every night shortly before bedtime. At last one morning, it being our weekly half-holiday, she came to me, and said I must again go over to Goldmore Hall and implore Mr. George to meet her. It was a matter of life and death, she told me to urge upon him—of *more* than life and death. I obeyed, carrying to Steel a letter from her, and also charged with a verbal message, asking him to be in the churchyard at eight o'clock that night. Mr. George, whom I found with a rainbow round his left eye and a lip still swollen, walked up and down the stable-yard of the Hall (where I had found him) for good ten minutes after he had read the letter, frowning, muttering, clenching his fists, and exhibiting sundry other outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual tumult. At last he turned to me, and saying curtly, "I'll come," walked away.

I resolved to see the upshot of this tryst also. And as it happened that the curate had been called away to a cottage at some distance, I was able to steal out, and take up a position in a coign of vantage under the rough-hewn stones of the churchyard wall without much fear of being missed. In my impatient curiosity, I went much earlier than necessary, and, in spite of cold and churchyard goblins, sat sturdily coiled up in my corner. And I was rewarded for my perseverance, and the hardihood both of body and mind above my years, by witnessing more than I expected.

First of all, Mr. George appeared upon the scene, well-nigh an hour, I should think, before the appointed time. On arrival he looked at his watch by a dark lantern which he carried, and then went into the church porch, and, sitting down on a bench, lighted a cigar. How I envied him his shelter and his huge great-coat, for I was so frozen that I could not feel my limbs! But all my discomfiture was forgotten in surprise and eager curiosity when I saw a female figure climb over the churchyard stile—not that which led over the wall separating it from the Parsonage garden, from which direction I of course expected to see Mary appear, but on the opposite side. The figure advanced, stumbling over the graves and floundering through the high rank grass; for though the night was not pitch dark, the light of the winter crescent moon was not adapted to render locomotion in that unkempt, tumbled wilderness of hillocks and weeds safe or pleasant. She seemed to be looking about for some particular spot, with the position of which she was evidently not familiarly acquainted. At last she appeared to recognise it in an oddly-shaped tombstone, which stood in the corner of the enclosure, near which I was crouching. After a pause, apparently of uncertainty whether she was right, she stooped suddenly down, put her hand to the foot of the gravestone, rose again quickly, and made the best of her way back to the stile by which she had entered. As she turned to go her face was for a moment turned full towards me, and I recognised with astonishment the uncomely features of—Mrs. Potts of The Good Intent.

Her movements had not escaped the notice of the other unseen watcher on the scene. No sooner had she disappeared over the wall than I saw the dark-red spark of Mr. George's cigar advance from the gloom of the church porch. He came to the gravestone, groped about where the woman had placed her hand, and presently, by the aid of his lantern, discovered what she had deposited there. It was a letter.

Steel turned the light of his lantern on the address, and scrutinised it keenly. I then heard him give a bitter laugh and mutter aloud, "It was not to be the postman of this precious missive that I was sent for, I suspect. But the gravestone does not seem to be a very safe or convenient letter-box, and it may save trouble and time in more ways than one, if I deliver it."

And accordingly he put the letter in his pocket, and burying his chin in the collar of his great-coat, walked back to the shelter of the porch.

Mary Lee came soon afterwards. Steel advanced towards her, and they met about twenty yards from my hiding-place. I could not hear what passed, but apparently Steel at once handed her the letter with some cutting remark. Mary snatched it from him and tore open the envelope with hungry eagerness, regardless alike of his words or his presence. She strove in vain to read it by the dim starlight; and then I saw him lift the slide of his lantern and turn the light on the paper. She glanced over the letter, which seemed to be of the briefest; and then, convulsively crushing the paper in her hand, she threw her arms wildly above her head, cast her eyes towards heaven, as if all hope for her on earth were gone, and then, with a low wailing moan, sank, as if crushed by some unseen but tremendous weight, to the ground at George Steel's feet.

He, apparently horror-stricken at the effect which the letter had produced, threw his lantern down, and kneeling beside her, raised the lifeless form, and laid the pallid cheek upon his knee. In the first impulse of my own terror, I too had rushed forward and come close to them. But when I saw Mary's death-like face, I was overcome by an undefinable horror, and, turning round, ran like a frightened hare towards the house. At the stile I paused for a moment and looked back—Steel was bending over the girl and covering her face with passionate kisses—and as I looked, I thought I could observe a slight movement of her limbs, as though she were recovering consciousness. But I ran to the house.

I waited in great anxiety at my bedroom window for Mary's return. I saw her come back through the garden, I should think, half an hour afterwards. Then I went to bed, and, worn out by my long walk, my cold ambush, and the agitation aroused by what I had witnessed, I soon fell asleep.

When I came down next morning, there was a strange and mysterious commotion in the little household. I soon learnt the cause. Mary Lee was gone—nor did she ever return to that house, which now seemed to me doubly gloomy, void of her presence, and haunted by the ominous mystery of her flight.

I did not again see the other actor in the churchyard scene either. The next day was that fixed for Steel's return to Haileybury, and he did not, as usual, return for the next summer vacation to Goldmore Hall.

Mr. Lee bore alike his daughter's flight and the disgrace attaching to it with an appearance of more than his habitual cynicism. He made no attempt to discover what had become of her, showed no sign of grief, and would mention her name in conversation, when occasion required, with a hard indifference, as though she had left her home in the most ordinary manner possible. But he grew thin and haggard; and ere a year had passed from the time of Mary's flight, the villagers shook their heads, and remarked that "t' parson was not half t' mon he had been." The post-bag strap, however, continued as busy as ever, and I do not think that Bob and I detected any marked failure of strength in the sinews of his arm.

In the following December it was decided, to my great comfort, that I was to leave Slagby "for good." During the last days of my purgatory I wandered about, paying farewell visits to the old haunts which were associated with many of the incidents in Mary's unhappy courtships. The last day but one before the Christmas holidays the weather was so stormy that I could not face the driving showers and bleak blasts on the moors, and yet I was too restless to stop at home. So I bethought me of repairing in the afternoon for a last gill of beer in the sanded parlour of The Good Intent. To my surprise, when I reached the public-house, I found the setter dog, which I had twice before seen there, lying in the doorway. Pearson must be there again: what could he have come for now that Mary was gone? But however that might be, I at any rate did not care to meet him again; so, foregoing the anticipated beer, I turned back without entering the house.

It was a miserable afternoon; and as, drenched to the skin and chilled to the marrow, I plodded ankle-deep along the miry road, I most heartily wished I had never come out. I had nearly reached the bridge where the road to The Good Intent met that which led from Slagby along the high river-bank to Puddleborough, and I could already hear the sullen roar of the stream as it rolled its swollen and turbid flood with tremendous force through the channel, which was here banked up into a narrow pass. Suddenly a strange object appeared before me coming from the Puddleborough road, and turning up that down which I was walking. It consisted of four men carrying something white. Two other men walked behind. I could not at first make out what the burden was. But as the little procession passed me, I recognised that dreadful profile which is presented by a dead body with a sheet spread over it. In an awed whisper I asked one of the men who followed, "What is it?"

He answered gruffly, "A wench drownded hersel' in t' Clink Pool yonder," and passed on.

With the morbid curiosity of a boy, I followed at a distance, and saw the bearers lay down their burden at the door of The Good Intent. Mrs. Potts came to the door, and after apparently some little altercation, the hurdle on which the body lay was lifted again and carried inside the house. I went to the door and peeped in: there was a bustle in the sanded parlour, two or three miners who had been drinking hastily assisting Mrs. Potts to clear the pewter mugs and clay pipes off the large deal table in the centre of the room. Then the body was laid down on the greasy boards, amongst puddles of spilt beer and ashes shaken from pipe-bowls. Then just as they were rearranging the sheet, which had got shifted in the transfer of the corpse from the stretcher to the table, a scuffle was caused by the setter, which had followed the men in, giving a low melancholy whine, and trying to jump on the table.

"Confound it!" cried the man who had been taking the leading part in conducting the proceedings, giving the animal a kick, which caused it to skulk in a corner of the room, and then sit wistfully gazing at the still form on the table.

Then I turned away with a shudder, and ran home. But how much greater my horror would have been had I known that the features, which seemed so sharply defined under the thin veil of that damp sheet spread upon the beer-stained table, were the same as those on which I had so often gazed with admiration and love—those of the beautiful Mary Lee!

Ill news travels fast, and, when I reached Slagby, the terrible tidings had already reached the village and the Parsonage. In the former, groups of excited women were eagerly discussing the poor girl's awful fate. But in the house which had so lately been her home the urgency of a new disaster had already diverted the attention of its inmates from the first. Mr. Lee had been seized with a paralytic stroke on hearing the news, and was then lying speechless, and, indeed, dying.

The next day the coroner arrived and held an inquest at The Good Intent. I saw an account of it in the Puddleborough newspaper, when I went home for the holidays.

It appeared that Mary Lee's body had been found by some labourers, caught by the weeds on the river-bank upwards of a mile below the bridge. The only evidence forthcoming as to the manner in which she met with her death was that of a lad who had been for some purpose on the bank of the river on the Slagby side. On the opposite or Puddleborough side, where the bank was very high and precipitous, and the road passes along the top close to the edge—from the description given I concluded that the spot must have been very near the scene of my tumble, and Mary's first ill-fated meeting with Pearson—he had seen a woman standing, seemingly waiting for some one. After a time a man came up to her, and the witness saw her catch hold of his arm as if to detain him; they spoke together for a few minutes only, and then the man seemed to shake her off roughly and attempt to walk away, but she threw herself on her knees before him and clung to him. Then there was a kind of struggle; the man got away from her once, but she rose from her knees and followed him, and caught hold of the lappets of his coat; then he either struck or pushed her violently away, and she fell on her face; the man then rapidly made off and disappeared.

The witness said he would have gone to the woman's help, but it was impossible to cross the flooded stream except by the bridge. She lay on the ground for several minutes, then she got on her feet, but seemed hardly able to stand, and staggered about; she looked dazed, and did not seem to know where she was going. Instead of going along the path, she tottered close up to the edge of the cliff; and, unfortunately, just at that point the heavy rains had caused a landslip, which had carried away the railing with it for several yards. The woman either fell or threw herself over the cliff right into the river, and the rapid current swept her out of witness's sight almost in a moment.

What was the man to whom Mary Lee had spoken like? Was he tall or short? Well, the witness could not just tell for certain; perhaps he might have been just a little above the common size, or perhaps a little under. How was he dressed? Well, there was nothing particular about his dress that witness took notice of it. He thought that likely he had on an overcoat, but could not be sure of it. And so on. In short, no clue whatever could be obtained to identify the man.

I, of course, might have enlightened the coroner to some extent on this point, and so doubtless could Mrs. Potts. But neither of us thought it necessary to do so. Indeed, so far as I was concerned, although I knew from the setter being at The Good Intent that its master, Pearson, must also have come back to the neighbourhood, and therefore could not but suspect that in all probability he was the man to whom Mary had been seen pleading in vain, I could not then, nor for many years after, understand why, if he had cast her off, he should have come back to the neighbourhood at all, for I knew, from hints I had gathered from Mary, that he lived far away, in another county.

On the other hand, there was an alternative supposition, an improbable one certainly, but one which, nevertheless, I could not get out of my mind. Mr. George Steel had, as I casually learnt before I left Slagby, arrived at Goldmore Hall the very day before Mary's death.

To which of her two lovers had Mary Lee fled when she left her father's house? Had she gone *after* Pearson or *with* Steel? Upon the answer to that chiefly depended the answer to the other question, which of the two it was in whose company she was last seen before her desperate leap or fall?

There is one more slight episode which must be briefly related before I finish my account of my own personal share in the events which I am narrating. After that I shall appear no more upon the scene, but must tell the story as I have been able to collect it from the mouths of others.

After completing my education under less vigorous stimulants to exertion than the Slagby post-bag, I turned my attention to the law, and in due course of time I was lucky enough to become the junior partner in a well-established firm of country solicitors.

In the course of our business a rather delicate negotiation was committed to us, regarding a considerable sum of money which was vested in trustees under a marriage settlement; it was desired to somewhat relax certain terms of the settlement. The proposed modification was really for the benefit of everybody concerned. But one of the trustees, a certain Colonel Campion, was obstinate. It was at last decided that I should go and have a personal conference with this gentleman, in the hope of inducing him to hear reason and give way; and I accordingly took the train one morning for ——, a little roadside station on a certain railway line which need not be specified, within a few miles of which Colonel Campion's residence, Beechly Park, was situated.

When I had arrived within half an hour of the end of my journey, a gossiping little man got into the carriage, and lost no time in entering into conversation with me. He soon extracted from me the information that I was booked to ——.

"Ah, then you must be going to visit the Rev. Mr. Jinkins at Liverside Rectory," remarked my companion dogmatically.

"How should you know that?" I asked.

"Because there is no other gentleman's house for which —— is the nearest station. There are stations within two miles of it on each side, one or the other of which is much more convenient for any other house in the neighbourhood."

"Then how came they to put a station at ——? Was it solely for Mr. Jinkins' use and behoof? The reverend gentleman nust be a man of consideration in these parts!"

"O no. It was old Campion of Beechly who insisted on having the station at his park-gates."

"And why might not I be bound for Beechly Park as well as for Liverside Rectory?" asked I. "Is it that my appearance possesses a sanctimonious air, or that it lacks an aristocratic one, which induces you to assign me quarters at the Parsonage rather than at the Hall?"

"No, no. Nothing to do with you in particular. In the old man's time I should have taken it for granted that anybody who got out at —— Station was going to the Park. But it is very different with the present master of Beechly. No one ever sees the inside of *his* house, except his lawyer; and you are neither him nor any of his clerks, I know."

I thought this an opportunity, not to be thrown away, of learning something about the character and habits of Colonel Campion, in order that I might know better how I could approach him in the discharge of my delicate mission with the best chance of success. So I invited my loquacious friend to explain himself more fully, which he incontinently proceeded to do, nothing loth.

"He is a queer fellow, this present Campion. I remember him well when he was a young lad. Law! he *was* a wild one! full of fun and devilment. He made the old man jump in his gouty chair sometimes, I fancy, by the mad things he did. But old Campion always used to say that he had no fear of his not settling down all in good time to what a Campion of Beechly should be, and always had been any time these five hundred years. And sure enough, there always was about the young fellow, in the midst of his wildest excesses and freaks, a sort of pride and haughty superiority to all the world outside the ring-fence of Beechly Park, which was of the true Campion kidney. I don't know whether you are conversant with Bell's Letters, sir;—I am. But if you are, you will understand what I mean when I say that this Campion, as he was in those mad days, reminds me very much of the Prince Hal of our immortal bard."

I nodded appreciation of the comparison.

"Well, sir, when he was about, I should say, three or four and twenty, a sudden change came over him, which astonished those who had not studied the secret springs of human nature in the volumes of our poets as I have. But I knew it was the most natural thing in the world; couldn't have been otherwise, in fact, without making the world altogether different from what it is."

"And what, may I ask, was the nature of this change—or rather, according to your view, this evolution?"

"Yes, you may well call it revolution, though, mind you, the Campions have always been red-hot Tories from the time of Prince Hal himself, and dead against Democracy. Well, the clarion of war resounded through the land, and young Campion, who was in the 25th Hussars, went to the Crimea, and they said there never was seen such a fellow for fighting. Egad! the grimmest of his ancestors that I have seen hung up in armour in the Hall yonder, when I have gone over it in the absence of the family, would have thought twice before doing the desperate deeds that he did. They wanted to give him the Victoria Cross a dozen times over. But, bless your soul! the Campions think scorn of what other men value most. They hold themselves so high, they think the Queen herself can't confer honour on them; so he wouldn't have it. Then no sooner was the Russian War over than he'd got so fond of fighting he could not leave it off; and so off he goes to China, or Persia, or the Cape, I forget which, to find some more of it. He was all through the Indian Mutiny too; and it was while he was in India that the old man died, and he came into the property. I saw him when he came back in '59, and I would not have known the gaunt, stern-looking, silent man, with grizzled hair and tanned-leather chops, for the same as the gay, ruddy-faced lad we had been accustomed to see driving a pair of half-broken horses, tandem, at full gallop through the market-place half a dozen years before."

"But since he came into the property, I suppose," said I, "he has 'grown sick of wounds and scars' himself, and equally eschewed the earlier practices you speak of, which were calculated, I should think, to inflict them on other people, and has settled down as a respectable country gentleman, J.P., and 'custolorum,' as the immortal bard has it."

"He has given up soldiering certainly, and if he ever drives tandem," replied my companion, "it is not at the risk of life and limb to us good burgesses of Market Lupford. But as to settling down, why, he has settled down about as quietly as the Wandering Jew, or Cain after he had slain Abel. In the seven years and over that have passed since his father died, he has slept, I should say, at a liberal computation, seventeen nights under the roof-tree of Beechly Hall."

"Where does he generally live, then?"

"Central Africa, Thibet, Patagonia, the Mountains of the Moon, the top of the South Pole, for aught I, or indeed anybody else, knows. When he *is* at Beechly, he might just as well be at the Antipodes. Nobody ever sees him, except, I believe, Mr. Jinkins, who is one of your High Church, and a kind of father-confessor to him, I understand. Indeed, I heard that the reception he gave our county magnates, when they visited him on his return from India, was not of a kind to encourage any of them to repeat the experiment."

"And what is supposed to be the cause of such misanthropy as you describe—sunstroke or a cross in love?" I asked.

"Why, I have little doubt myself that there is a board out of the floor in one of the upper stories; and folks say, too, there was a woman in the case—as they always do. Some, that think they know more than their neighbours, hint at worse things; and there certainly were whispers of an ugly story many years ago; it was a *very* ugly story, and if there was any truth in it, would be hard to reconcile with the traditional honour and chivalry that are supposed to be heirlooms in the house of Campion. But it's an ill-natured world, and very likely the whole thing was a lie. Nevertheless—my study of Bell's Letters has made me a bit fanciful, I daresay—but I never see Colonel Campion (which is seldom enough) without thinking of the 'Wild Darrell' of the Scottish minstrel's ballad. Do you know the lines?—

'Wild Darrell is an altered man,
The village crones can tell;
He looks pale as clay, and strives to pray,
If he hears the convent bell.

If prince or peer cross Darrell's way,
He'll beard him in his pride ;
If he meet a friar of orders gray,
He droops and turns aside !'"

Here the train stopped at ——, and I bid my talkative fellow-passenger good-morning. His account of the person I was going to see was certainly not encouraging for the success of my mission, but I shrewdly suspected that the portion of the little gentleman's discourse which contained the largest element of truth was that in which he admitted the effects upon his own mind—and consequently, I presumed, upon his conversation—of his assiduous devotion to "Bell's Letters."

A carriage was waiting for me, and carried me through a splendid park, beautifully wooded, to the house—a venerable and stately pile of buildings of the Tudor period—about two miles distant. Assuredly what I saw as I passed along showed nothing of the neglect and wretchedness which one might have expected to see on the estate of an habitually absentee landlord, who had been described to me as a compound of insanity, debauchery, and misanthropy. The cottages seemed to be surrounded with every comfort which a benevolent landlord's constant care could provide ; and the labourers whom I met were contented-looking and respectful, as well as "fat and well liking."

I found Colonel Campion himself, however, to the full as proud and repelling in his manner and bearing as my informant had described him. In this respect he had certainly not over-coloured his picture. I entered on the business with which I was intrusted, and placed our view of the case before Colonel Campion in the most favourable light I could. But I must confess the man's appearance and manner disconcerted me, and I fear my eloquence was somewhat halting. At any rate it had no effect upon him. He received every successive argument with the same stern, unbending, haughty disapproval. At last this unreasonable obstructive attitude began to irritate me beyond control, and

I spoke with some impatience, and perhaps with a slight deviation from periphrases, not quite in accordance with perfect courtesy. Then the Colonel flashed forth. He did not for a moment throw off his haughty composure, but his words were as trenchant as a two-edged sword. He said plainly that the proposal with which I was charged was nothing but an attempt on the part of my client, the husband, to "swindle" the wife and children, for whom he (the Colonel) was trustee, out of their money.

I sprang from my chair as he uttered the opprobrious word.

"How dare you, sir," cried I, trembling with anger, "use such language with respect to a case in which I and my partners, a firm of unimpeached and unimpeachable character, are engaged?"

"I shall take leave," replied the Colonel—who also rose from his seat, but with deliberate composure, and apparently only for the purpose of intimating his desire that I should leave the house—"I shall take leave to say that a firm of lawyers who allow themselves to be made the agents for taking advantage of the fond affection of an inexperienced young lady, to rob her of her property, are no better than a gang of burglars."

I was almost choked with indignation; but after two or three ineffectual efforts to articulate, I did at last gasp out,

"If such—if such persons are burglars, as you say, what—what is the man who takes advantage, as you say, of the fond affection of an inexperienced young girl to—to seduce her to shame, ruin, desertion—dastardly, cruel desertion—and death? What is he? A murderer! a murderer, Colonel Campion, or—*James Pearson!*"

As I hissed out the latter name, stretching forward my face close to his, a look of ghastly anguish and terror overspread the features which had been so disdainfully composed but a moment before. He dropped, as if struck down by an actual blow, on the chair behind him.

I seized my hat and papers, and, without another glance at him, hurried from the house.

Such was my meeting with one of Mary Lee's lovers twelve years after the poor girl had been laid to rest by her father's side in Slagby churchyard. My narrative will now make another leap almost as long, and take up the history of another of the actors in that tragedy, twenty years after the date of its closing catastrophe, and in a land far away from the scene of it.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMMISSIONER OF BÉSHUCKABAD.

THE Commissioner of Béshuckabad was by no means one of the lesser lights in that constellation of the Eastern official heaven which shed the mild beams of paternal government on the happy plains of the Mâ-Bâp Provinces. He ruled with autocratic sway, under the proudly unassuming designation of his "division," a kingdom half as large again as Belgium, and over two millions of dusky people regarded his person as the sole and inexhaustible depositary of the mighty power of British Empire.

India is a land of contrasts and incongruities, and the office of the Commissioner of Béshuckabad presented some which were striking enough. There were the shelves full of broad-shouldered volumes of Acts, Commentaries, and Cases. There were the piles of Blue-books and Reports, towering aloft like Pelion on Ossa, and oppressing the mind with an unconquerable sense of weariness only to look on their outsides. There were the swarms of letters and dockets, single and in bundles, overspreading the wide central plain of the baize-covered table, climbing towards heaven by tier upon tier of pigeon-holes, and descending in the other direction by a staircase of drawers too full to be half shut. This was all quite according to one's preconceived notions of what the office of a judge or of a commissioner of inland revenue should be. And the yards—nay, furlongs—of red-tape, that magic clue, without which the mind of man is no more capable on India's coral strand than by the Strand of royal-towered Thame of tracing its way through the labyrinth of public business, was, as it were, the touch of nature which seemed to bind the autocrat of Béshuckabad in close kinship with the most humdrum clerk in Somerset House. All this was as it should be. But when one came to look for the surroundings which, according to one's innate idea of the eternal fitness of things, should have accompanied the picture, one's mind was rudely thrown out of all its bearings. Instead of the dingy, rain-bespattered window, displaying a view of nothing else but three or four other dingy, rain-bespattered windows on the opposite side of the street, and in place of the ceaseless rattle and rumble of cab or omnibus, the wide-opened venetianed doors let in glimpses of Paradise—

> "Where the light wings of Zephyr, oppress'd with perfume,
> Waned faint o'er the gardens of Gúl in her bloom."

A foreground of luxuriant flowers and shrubs, a background of leafy branches waving and rustling in the balmy air, the varied songs of a score of sweet-voiced birds, and the scent of the jasmine and the mango-blossom wafted through the trellised verandah, were all fitter to environ a fairy bower than a public office.

And even if one turned one's back to the open doors, and looked only at the interior, one had not far to look for contrast and incongruity notable enough. There sat the Commissioner, the ideal of the serious, practical, hard-headed, unimaginative Englishman of business; dressed with the utmost neatness, though in an easy-fitting costume, more adapted to the climate than the black frock-coat which he would without doubt have worn in his native land. He was somewhat small of stature and slight; but his well-proportioned and firmly-knit figure fully redeemed his presence from the reproach of puniness. His face was decidedly, indeed remarkably, handsome, though the Indian climate and the constant wear of anxious and responsible office, rather than age (for he was little past forty), had sallowed his cheek, seamed his high forehead, and plentifully besprinkled his dark hair with silver. Countenance and manner alike, the compressed lips, the measured, though by no means slow, utterance, and the erect and even rigid bearing, testified to long habits of reserve and self-control. But a close observer might now and again see a momentary flash disturbing the usually steady beam of his dark-brown eyes, and a slight quick movement of the foot which gave hints of a temper naturally by no means of the most placid order.

Before him sat a figure as uncouth and wild as he was conventional and decent—a figure as little in accord with the soft beauty of the scene outside as with the dull aspect of routine within the room. This was a native, of large and bulky dimensions, but bent with age. His dress was coarse, and very far indeed from clean. A vast length of turban, which may once have been white, twisted into a rope and wound round and round his head in loose careless folds, through which his long and shaggy gray locks escaped in a most untidy manner, a waistcoat of greasy sheepskin, with the wool inside, and over that a well-worn burnoose of brown camel's hair, and drawers of voluminous folds of cloth of the same dubious colour as his turban. His countenance gave one somehow an inexpressible impression of fallen and shattered savage nobility. In spite of the dim and bleared eyes, and the faded and furrowed cheeks (which the beard, dyed a glossy purple black, only made the more ghastly), and in spite of an obsequiousness of demeanour in presence of the English official, only tempered by a certain dull apathy, there was still in his aspect, one could not miss perceiving, though where or how it manifested itself one could no more explain, a relic of long-forgotten pride and ferocity. Altogether, as one saw him sitting there, with an air of awkwardness and discomfort, partly due, no doubt, to insufficient practice in the occidental art of balancing his person on a hard-seated, straight-backed chair, and partly also to the severe and searching regard with which the Commissioner continued to honour him, one felt an instinctive longing, born of pity and respect, to whip him up from among surroundings where he was so strangely out of place, and, carrying him back a few centuries, drop him into the wild Tartar camp of Jhengis Khan or Tamerlane.

"This disorder, this absence of all restraint amongst your tribesmen, Kumbukt Khan," the Commissioner was saying, "cannot be allowed to continue. I see by last quarter's returns that cattle thefts have increased by no less than *two*—no—less—than—TWO—over the number reported in the corresponding term in the previous year."

"Through your Honour's auspicious favour they will now cease," muttered the old man in reply, continuing the while without intermission to pass through his palsied fingers the beads of a rosary which he held. "But," he added, "times are very hard. Three harvests have failed."

"Cease they certainly shall, though not through my auspicious favour, but either through your more diligent and more honest efforts to keep your people under control, or by the efforts of somebody else whom I will appoint to do your duty for you, if you can't or won't do it for yourself. So now, Kumbukt Khan, listen, and I advise you do so heedfully, for I have sent for you this morning to have a long and full discussion of the affairs of your clan. I assure you there are many things which require explanation, and that explanation must be no longer delayed. I am determined to have them all cleared up this very—"

Just then there entered, with noiseless, barefoot tread, but not without a soft rustling murmur from the ample folds of well-starched calico trousers of snowy whiteness, a swarthy domestic. He was clothed with serenity as with a garment. Beside him the most imposingly ducal of the butlers of Christendom would have seemed insignificant and flurried, and the superbest Belgravian "Jeames" must have hidden his diminished and powdered head. Slightly bending his princely crest, and raising a dusky hand, embellished with costly turquoise rings, to the gold-braided turban which encircled his majestic brows, he proclaimed, in a voice befitting alike the gravity of the announcement, the rank of the person to whom it was made, and the dignity of him who made it, that—breakfast was on the table.

The Commissioner replied with a curt and somewhat impatient "Very well," and, making no sign of any intention to move, resumed the momentarily interrupted thread of his lecture to his visitor.

"Now, in the first place, scarcely a day passes but I receive renewed complaints from the steward of the Nawab of Zulmkote of trespasses which your people commit on his lands and violence towards his servants. Now, you yourself must be held personally and directly responsible for this."

"Your Majesty," answered Kumbukt Khan, counting his beads more diligently than ever, "has taken the Nawab under the shadow of your protection; how is it possible that I or any of my people can annoy him?"

At this point the serene servitor reappeared, and solemly pronounced,

"The Mem Sahib says they have all sat down, and the chops are getting cold. She desires your Honour to come at once."

"Say I can't come just now," answered his master sharply. "I am engaged in very important business. Tell them to breakfast without me."

And turning to Kumbukt Khan, he said sternly, "This will not pass. The young Nawab is under my protection, it is true; and, mark me well, I intend to protect him. But I know your stubborn and audacious truculence of old, Kumbukt Khan, and—"

"The Mem Sahib says it is already twenty minutes past ten, and she and the missy Baba Sahibs are going to drive into the cantonments after breakfast. She wishes your Honour to come immediately."

Thus the stately domestic, once more reappearing.

"Tell the Mem Sahib that I really cannot come—for a minute or two," answered his master, by no means so peremptorily as before. "But I shall not be long. Ask them just to begin without me. Well, Kumbukt Khan, to be brief—as I have a great deal of work to-day, and cannot spare much time to you. In one word, I insist upon your at once taking the following steps. You must send your second son, a young man of most shocking character, away to—"

"The Mem Sahib says she cannot begin without your Honour, and she begs you will not keep her waiting any longer," interrupted, with untiring suavity, he of the braided turban and turquoise rings, reëntering for the fourth time.

"O, very well, say I am coming," said the Commissioner. And rising, he hurriedly dismissed his visitor with, "I have no time to attend to you this morning, Kumbukt Khan; I have too much other work to do. But think of what I have said, and—well, yes; come again to-morrow."

Kumbukt Khan, with a sigh which *may* have indicated disappointment at the postponement of the promised lecture, retired into the verandah, while the Commissioner, passing through the opposite door, hastily traversed a covered passage, which connected his office with his dwelling-house, and entered the breakfast-room.

Here, I must confess, there were not any incongruities to upset one's sense of the fitness of things. The pleasant outside scene, of which only a glimpse could be obtained under the low-eaved verandah of the office, was here displayed to full view through three wide and lofty French windows, which opened on to a colonnaded, high-roofed terrace. Beyond swept a broad and well-trimmed lawn, whose emerald brightness, pleasant to the eye anywhere, was peculiarly refreshing in a country where the normal colour of "verdure" much resembles that of the grass in Hyde Park about the end of a very dry July. In the centre were stretched three lawn-tennis nets, which, though not in themselves objects of especial beauty, nevertheless added something to the charm of the scene, to the judicious eye, by the force of association. And all round the margin ran a gorgeous fringe of flower-beds; while further off, under the spreading branches of the fine pipul and mango trees, were curious labyrinths of shrubs and leafy grottoes, which again suggested to the thoughtful mind more graces than they actually impressed upon the gross material retina—visions of garden-parties in the balmy twilight (which in those climes melts with such convenient rapidity into darkness), flitting gleams of white muslin between the dark leafy screens, soft breaths of tender whispers through the still groves.

And, as I have said, the interior of the room was quite in harmony with the view outside. Everything in it was a combination of comfort and good taste; and the flower-beds round the lawn had paid such a heavy tribute to the table, mantelpiece, and pendent mural vase, that it seemed rather that the repast was spread in a fairy bower than in an apartment bearing so prosaic a name as "the breakfast-room."

The Commissioner came in with an alert step, expanded brow, and easy smile, showing no trace of annoyance at the gentle compulsion which had been used to lure him thither.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting long, my dear," he said, "but I could not possibly come till I had finished what I had to say to old Kumbukt Khan. Well, Bella," he continued, as two pretty girls rose and came forward to greet him, the one throwing her arms round his neck and kissing him with much effusion, the other more demurely offering her hand, but with an affectionate smile of welcome—"well, Bella, the wild roses, I see, have not suffered from the hothouse air of the ballroom last night, or rather this morning. *I* found it stifling enough, I can assure you. Good-morning, Miss Hawthorn, my dear."

The family of Mr. Steel—for the Commissioner of Béshuckabad was none other than the "Mr. George" of Goldmore Hall — now gathered round the breakfast-table, consisted of his wife, his only child Bella, and Miss Grace Hawthorn, whose position in the household, and relations with its several members, were of a very undefined character.

Mrs. Steel was a stately and portly—indeed, one may say *very* stately and *very* portly—dame. Her stateliness she could on occasion (as we shall see) throw off; her portliness, unfortunately, she could not. And this provoking circumstance alone prevented her being still a very handsome woman.

Her daughter, who had attained the mature age of seventeen and a half, was, as the child of such parents could scarcely help being, remarkably pretty. Her companion, Grace Hawthorn, was, in the eyes of not a few persons, even prettier. But their rival claims to preëminence in this respect were a matter of considerable controversy amongst the connoisseurs of the Béshuckabad cantonment, and one upon which I regard it as in no sense incumbent upon me dogmatically to pronounce.

While they were at table an attendant, clad in imperial purple, brought in the "dawk," or post-bag, and shot out its contents, a medley of envelopes of all sizes and sorts, by Mrs. Steel's chair. The man then deliberately squatted on the floor beside the heap, and, after disposing the long lappets of his scarlet robe so as to make himself quite comfortable, sleepily prepared to lay the documents in order. But in the mean time the impatient Mrs. Steel's experienced eye and deft fingers had eliminated from the confused heap of eight-inch long official envelopes some nine or ten less imposing but more interesting-looking letters, which she proceeded to sort much as if they had been a hand at whist just dealt to her.

"Here is a demi-official for you, George," she said, "from the Foreign Secretary. I wonder what he can be writing about? Perhaps to say that poor Mr. Cripplegate's gout has reached the stomach at last, and offering you the chief commissionership of Bunglebund. Shall I just open it while you go on with your breakfast? It will save you time."

But Mr. Steel did not avail himself of the considerate proposal, and the letter was lingeringly and reluctantly delivered into his outstretched hand, whence, with a heartless, not to say brutal, insensibility to the precarious condition of the afflicted Cripplegate, he consigned it to the silent oblivion of his coat-pocket.

Mrs. Steel then turned her attention to the remainder of her hand. Picking out one envelope, she closely scrutinised first the handwriting of the address, then the monogram on the other side, then the post-marks, and lastly, as it seemed, the texture and grain of the paper. How much further her inspection might have been carried it is impossible to say, had not her daughter, who had been watching her for some time with evident impatience, called out—by no means *pianissimo*—

"If that letter is for me, mamma, and does not feel as if it had an explosive machine inside, I should like to open it, please—that is, when you are quite tired of fingering it."

Thus admonished, Mrs. Steel threw the letter across the table, but even then did not altogether abandon her efforts to pry into its contents. Having failed to obtain a direct insight through the uncompromisingly thick envelope, she now sought to catch a glimpse of them by reflection in the mirror of her daughter's countenance. But Miss Bella Steel's face, unlike that of the simple Thane of Cawdor, was by no means a book wherein men—nor yet women, even though they were as lynx-eyed as her mamma—could read any matters, however strange—or familiar either, for that matter—which it was her cue to keep to herself.

So at last Mrs. Steel was reduced to the hard necessity of reading only her own proper correspondence. And, perhaps as a protest against the selfish incommunicativeness of her husband and daughter, she not only favoured the company with copious extracts from it as she proceeded with her perusal, but threw in also a running commentary of her own thereon.

"Dear me! the Governor-General going home at the end of this cold weather! Matilda writes that she has it on *unquestionable* authority. O, how *sorry* I am! *Dear* Lady Feathertop! What *shall* we do without her at Simla next season! Such unaffected kindness, such charming gaiety, such a high-bred tone! What *can* be the reason, I wonder? Let me see. Matilda goes on: 'It is Lady F. who insists on his going. She said nothing on earth would induce her to spend another hot weather at Simla'—ah, the damp, no doubt: her chest, poor dear! is very weak—'another hot weather at Simla, where the pompous inanity of Anglo-Indian dignitaries'—well, certainly, her ladyship is a little severe and sweeping; *some* may be pompous and inane, but not *all;* and she might remember that Lord Feathertop himself has never had the reputation of being a wizard: h-m-m—'of Anglo-Indian dignitaries, and the pretentious vulgarity of their wives'—gracious goodness me!" shrieked the outraged dame. And then, after a pause of several seconds, during which indignation half-choked her, and her fair neck and double chin flushed with the sanguine hue of the insulted turkey, "fierce she broke forth":

"Vulgarity, indeed! And who is Lady Feathertop, to talk about vulgarity, I should like to know? The granddaughter of a brewer, if he *was* a brewer, though I *have* heard that he kept a public-house, and most likely he did. Her own manners and appearance are those of a barmaid. Thank goodness, they are going! How we have put up with her insolence and his stupidity so long as we have is a marvel to *me*. Why, anybody but an imbecile would have insisted upon old Cripplegate retiring when he had that attack last year. Sir Ruby Carr strongly pressed upon him that he ought to do so; Lady Carr, another of the pretentious vulgarians, I suppose" (this with a withering sneer), "told me so herself. But Lord Feathertop has no more will of his own than a camel, and is just led by the nose by those pert young secretaries, instead of listening to the advice of experienced councillors like Sir Ruby Carr."

"Quite a Rehoboam, my dear," remarked Mr. Steel, with a quiet smile, as his wife paused in her torrent of indignant eloquence for sheer want of breath.

"Yes, indeed," she gasped.

"With a Jezebel for a wife," suggested Bella, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"So she is, my love," assented her mamma eagerly. "I have seen the paint; others may be deceived, but at Lady Carr's ball last season there could be no doubt about it: one eyebrow was twice as dark as the other."

With trembling fingers Mrs. Steel proceeded to tear open the covers of her other letters; and it may be worthy of remark that she read their contents in silence. Bella soon after left the room, as well as her half-finished breakfast. Perhaps she was in a hurry to answer the billet which had so exercised her mother's curiosity.

Miss Hawthorn was about to follow, and attend to the various duties which fell to her share in the household economy. And Mr. Steel, who was not in the habit of wasting on toast and eggs time which could be more profitably employed over dockets and *nukshas*, also rose from the table. But Mrs. Steel detained them both.

"Please sit down a moment, George—I have something important to say to you. Grace dear, tell the *Khânsâmah* for the dinner-party to-morrow not to get a saddle; there is so much waste in a saddle, and as the General can't come, there will be none but small fry coming, except Mr. and Mrs. Podgers, and they are only uncovenanted; so a leg will do quite well. And I don't think there need be a turkey —or stay—yes; tell him to kill that one with the lame leg; nothing, it seems, will fatten it, and there is no use keeping it eating its head off. He can stuff the breast out with a couple of fowls, you know. And, Grace—"

"Come, my dear," interposed Mr. Steel, "you know I have a great deal of work. Could you not defer your instructions to Miss Hawthorn for a few minutes?"

"Don't put me out, George. I must attend to these things. If I did not, we should be eaten out of house and home; not that *you* would care, I daresay. But, for the sake of our dear child, *some* one must look after things; and she shall not be a beggar and outcast if her mother can help it, though I have to work my fingers to the bone. Of course I *might* have been saved some of this trouble, had Grace chosen to learn to relieve me of it. Most girls in her circumstances would have done so. Look at that dish of mince on the table, Grace; no one has touched a morsel, and now, I suppose, it will be thrown away and given to the sweeper, when it might have been saved for tiffin; and then the mutton-chops could have been kept till to-morrow, and if any of them were left over from breakfast—as they certainly would have been, for none of us would be likely to eat more than one each—they might have been made up into," &c.

Mr. Steel did not further attempt to stem the tide of housewifely eloquence, but waited with philosophic dignity until his dame allowed her assistant in the home department to retire, and was ready to attend to him.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. STEEL HAS HIS EYES OPENED—A PAINFUL OPERATION

"Love him! worse and worse. I thought the girl had been better bred."

WHEN Mr. Steel and his wife were left alone, the latter began,

"How can you allow Bella to treat her mother as she does?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Mr. Steel inquiringly.

"Did you not hear how rudely and insultingly she spoke to me about her letter? Any other father would have at least uttered a word of reproof to a child who addressed her mother in such terms."

"Yes, yes; I did observe with pain, with much pain," replied Mr. Steel (suppressing, however, with admirable self-command any outward manifestation of the agony he professed), "a certain flippancy in her manner which approached distressingly near to—vulgarity. I will speak to her."

"If she is learning vulgarity, we need not look far for the pattern she copies from," retorted Mrs. Steel significantly; "'evil communications corrupt good manners,' and Grace—"

"But," continued Mr. Steel, interrupting quietly, "I must say it struck me, my dear, that your curiosity about Bella's correspondence was just perhaps a little too pronounced. We must remember she is no longer a child."

"That is just what I do remember, and what you seem entirely to forget, Mr. Steel. You may regard our child as a mere toy and plaything to amuse you with her pretty ways, but, thank Heaven, she has at least *one* parent who takes a higher view of her duties."

"But surely, my dear, it is carrying parental control a little too far to pry into every letter received by a girl of nearly eighteen."

"Do you know who that letter was from?" asked Mrs. Steel, avoiding the profitless discussion of general principles, and coming at once to practical particulars.

"No; how should I?" returned her husband.

"How should you, indeed? Well, you *should;* that is all I can say. But when I tell you, I daresay you will be no wiser. I believe you are intimately acquainted with every swindling native *bunniah* and ruffian between this and Gurhi Moofsid—"

"Most of them, certainly," parenthetically assented the Commissioner, with conscious pride.

"And yet people of your own colour and language can carry on their villanies right under your nose."

"Why, I know some scamps, I am sorry to say, amongst our fellow-countrymen too."

"Well, do you know anything of Mr. Rattley Trapton?"

"I don't think I have ever seen the individual you mention; but I do happen, I am sorry to say, to know a good deal about him. It appears he is a nephew of Goodieshoes, of the Madras Service, who wrote to me not long ago to enlist my influence with the military people here to hush up, or at least pass over, a certain transaction in which Mr. Trapton certainly did not appear to advantage. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, he richly deserved to be cashiered, and many a better man, I have no doubt, has been so for less."

"And this is the sort of person with whom you are willing that your daughter should exchange love-letters before your very eyes."

"Good Heavens! Harriet, what do you mean?" ejaculated the Commissioner, springing from his seat as if a pin had been suddenly run into him. "What, Bella! You must be dreaming, my dear."

"That letter, Mr. Steel, which Bella received this morning, was from Rattley Trapton. And if you go to her room at this moment, you will find—well, you will find the door locked inside, and by the time it is opened for you, you won't find anything else. But, nevertheless, you may take my word for it, that Bella is at this moment answering that letter. It is not *I* who am dreaming."

"Harriet! is it possible that it is Bella that you are thus speaking of? Our—daughter—Bella!"

"Not that they need take the trouble to correspond by letter," continued Mrs. Steel. "They can contrive plenty of opportunity, it seems, for private conversation by word of mouth. Last Wednesday, when you remarked how late she came back in the pony carriage, and she said she had been sitting with old Mrs. Proser, and had not observed how the time slipped by, she had been driving with Trapton; she took him up outside the Hussar Mess Compound, and drove him out of cantonments down the Jungleabad road."

Mr. Steel muttered an ejaculation which sounded strangely incongruous with his usual precision of language. "But who told you all this?" he added.

"Mrs. Story—"

"Mrs. Story! Bah! Mrs. Story is a malignant gossip and liar."

"O, very well. And I suppose your daughter is one too, for she acknowledged it to me, and said she had only done it for 'a lark.'"

"A lark!" echoed Mr. Steel, with a shudder. "Why did you not tell me?"

"The poor child implored me not; she said it would pain you deeply. And she seemed so sorry and repentant, poor child; so I said I would not, if she promised to have nothing more to say to Trapton."

It was evident that Miss Bella's good-natured solicitude for her father's feelings had not been groundless. Mr. Steel strode about the room for some minutes in evident agitation.

"But where was Grace Hawthorn?" he suddenly asked. "Why was Grace not with her?"

"O, Grace Hawthorn!" answered his wife, with a sneer. "Of course, had your paragon of discretion been there, there could have been no possibility of impropriety. But I suppose even you would not wish to have Bella tacked on to Miss Hawthorn's apron-strings. Grace, after all, is not *quite* a guardian angel."

"Perhaps not," replied Mr. Steel dryly; "but, what is more to the purpose in the present case than angelic qualifications, she has had the advantage of some three or four more years' experience than Bella on this sublunary sphere of ours; and, moreover, the school of adversity in which he early years were passed may reasonably be presumed to have exercised a sobering influence on her character."

"Adversity as often makes people sly as sober," retorted

Mrs. Steel sententiously. "I shall always maintain, whatever you may say, that it might have been none the worse for poor dear Bella had Grace Hawthorn been provided for—if provided for she had to be—anywhere else than in this house."

"Remember, Harriet," replied Mr. Steel quickly, pausing suddenly in his walk up and down the room, "remember, it was not I who brought her here, or suggested or desired her being brought here."

"O, well, let us not dispute about *her*," said Mrs. Steel, cleverly evacuating the untenable position after serving her purpose of annoying the enemy; "we have our own child to think about at present."

So leaving Miss Hawthorn alone for the time, she and her husband occupied themselves in a serious conference regarding Bella and her perverse and shamelessly unreserved partiality for the disreputable Lieutenant Trapton.

It will, however, perhaps be more convenient for us to follow the red herring—if I may be permitted to change my metaphor and adopt a somewhat unsavoury one in connection with so refined a person as Mrs. Steel—which she had drawn across the original scent of the conversation. So instead of repeating in detail the abortive parental councils, I will inform the reader how Grace Hawthorn did enter the Commissioner's household.

She was an orphan; but how related, if at all, to Mr. or Mrs. Steel was not clearly known. Some people maintained one thing, and some the other; and each had equally strong grounds for their assertion, namely, none whatever. Mr. Steel was not in the habit of being communicative about any of his private affairs; and his wife, though by no means so reticent in general, practised an unwonted reserve in this particular instance. But however that may have been, Mr. Steel had shown a kindly interest in Grace from her early childhood. She had been brought up by an aunt, a person in poor circumstances, who was assisted from the first in her charitable charge by a small allowance from Mr. Steel, then himself a young writer with no great fund of superfluous cash at his disposal after defraying the cost of purchase and keep of a couple of Arabs, famed in the meets of the Tent Club, and a pair of big Waler mares, which were the glory of the "Course" at Calcutta. When he took unto him a wife, a reigning beauty, and (in those days) by no means disposed to excessive thrift, he still contrived that the allowance to Grace's guardian should be punctually kept up. But it was not increased; and, as we have heard Mr. Steel himself say, Grace's girlhood passed in circumstances not very far removed from actual want.

But when she was fourteen a great change took place in her condition. Mr. Steel then obtained furlough and visited England. Affliction not unfrequently tends to impel a man of naturally generous temperament to seek consolation vicariously by conferring upon some other a happiness which may in some sort counterbalance his own sorrow. Now, Mr. Steel had, under a somewhat cold exterior, a very generous heart, and at that time it had been softened by the fires of a series of great afflictions. For the first few years his marriage had not been happy. His handsome bride early developed a great talent for flirtation. A fine temper on his part, assisted by that true old ally, Time, who considerately buried some of Mrs. Steel's most dangerous snares under successive layers of fat, brought him slowly, but safe and sound in the end, through this trial. But then followed others, which did not admit of the "all's well that ends well" balsam, but left scars not to be cured on this side of time. One after another two sons and two daughters died, leaving the Steels only one child, Bella, whom they then had but feeble hopes of ever seeing grow up to womanhood. It was at this period that, while on furlough to England for the purpose of seeking the best medical advice for Bella, Mr. Steel paid a visit—Mrs. Steel did not accompany him—to the cottage where his little pensioner dwelt. He was struck by her beauty and loving ways, and resolved to make a large increase in his bounty towards her. He found that her aunt had been able to give her a much better education than could have been expected in her circumstances, the fact being that among many other hearts which the child had won in her little neighbourhood was luckily that of a lady who kept a good old-fashioned country school. So Grace, though innocent enough of brilliant accomplishments, was by no means ignorant for her age. He consulted this lady, and, in accordance with her advice, determined that the most effectual way of benefiting her pupil was to complete her education in such a fashion as to place her in a position to earn a livelihood hereafter by herself becoming a teacher. This was the more necessary, as he was told that her aunt could not live long, and after her death Grace would be utterly homeless. He therefore sent her to the best school he could hear of. Indeed, so carefully had he selected it, that when his own only daughter outgrew the delicacy of her childhood, and reached an age when it was necessary to choose a school for her, he could find none better than that in which he had placed Grace.

So the two girls became schoolfellows. Grace, from gratitude to Mr. Steel, naturally watched over Bella with sedulous care; and Bella in return conceived so violent an affection for Grace that at the end of three years, when Mrs. Steel came home to take her back to India, the excessively spoilt and imperious young lady flatly refused to go unless she was allowed to take her "darling Gracy" (now become a governess in the same school in which she had previously been a pupil) along with her.

Now, Mrs. Steel had known nothing about her husband's visit to Miss Hawthorn's humble early home. She had simply heard of her as an object of the Commissioner's lordly bounty, and had never considered her worth a second thought. At present her maternal heart was so overflowing with pride and love for the darling child whom she had not seen for many years, and whom she had come home to find so beautiful and bright, that she had neither time nor eyes for observing closely the meek and demure governess whom it was Bella's caprice to patronise. Had these things been otherwise, it is probable that the wary matron would, notwithstanding the imperious sway which her self-willed daughter had even already managed to establish over her mind, have firmly resisted this freak of carrying off Miss Hawthorn along with them to Béshuckabad. But as it was, she yielded after a very faint protest.

In justice, however, to this prudent matron, I must add that Bella's impetuous demands were not altogether unsupported by certain more practical suggestions supplied by her own sagacious mind. She had for some time been on the look-out for a sort of "companion," lady-housekeeper, refined drudge, to assist her in countermining the wily devices of that arch enemy to her peace, her *Khánsámah*, and she had hitherto found the exact article she wanted extremely difficult to come at. Now, here was the very thing, with all the qualifications she had ever looked for, as well as one or two important ones which she could never have dreamt of. For example, she had always expected to have to pay a pretty high salary; but Grace Hawthorn would want none at all. Then a woman bound to her interests by a mere mercenary contract would herself have to be looked after with a sharp eye; but Grace's gratitude to and dependence on her benefactor would be a guarantee for her honesty. True that at first the calls of Bella's childish affection for this girl might interfere with the steadiness of her application to household duties, but Mrs. Steel was quite astute enough to argue that this was likely to be a very temporary drawback. She thought that her impulsive child's feelings would doubtless be shortlived in exact proportion to their violence, and that, though the two friends might be inseparable so long as there was no counter-attraction, Bella would probably grow reconciled to considerable breaks in the continuity of her intercourse with her dear Gracy, when she should find gay young Hussars or Lancers to occupy the vacant hours.

Miss Hawthorn herself was strongly averse to the arrangement. Fond as she was of Bella, she was not willing to give up the independence and comfort of the position she now held as a well-paid and trusted assistant in the school, to be that capricious young princess's lady-in-waiting. Nor had she been particularly fascinated by the grand condescension of Bella's imperial mother. But when such a point was made of her accompanying them, and especially when she was led to believe that Mr. Steel himself was earnestly desirous to have her companionship for his daughter, she thought that gratitude to him forbade her to resist. With many misgivings, therefore, she consented to the arrangement.

As a matter of fact, not only was Mr. Steel not earnestly desirous for Miss Hawthorn's domestication in his house, but he was totally ignorant of his wife's and daughter's little plan; and when he heard of it, his annoyance was extreme. He was a man who highly valued the complete privacy of domestic life. And though he might have put up without much grumbling with a purely mercenary "lady-help" to his wife, as with a necessary evil, which might by constant circumspection be kept at any rate outside the innermost ring of home-life, he clearly foresaw that no such exclusion would be possible in Miss Hawthorn's case. His previous relations towards her rendered it necessary that, if she was to enter his house at all, it must be as a second daughter.

But it was too late to veto the project. Ere he received the first hint of it, all three ladies were already tossing on the unquiet bosom of the Bay of Biscay, on their way out to him.

Mr. Steel, though naturally a man of quick emotions, had as I have before hinted, schooled himself habitually to suppress all outward signs of them. And having had several weeks in which to think over the approaching arrival of Grace Hawthorn, it might have been expected that, even supposing there had existed any reasons, arising from old memories or the like, for his not being able to meet her without some degree of agitation, no visible signs thereof would have been allowed to catch the jealous eye of his wife. But then it must be remembered that at the same time that he met Miss Hawthorn he also saw, after many years of absence, his only child, of whom he was passionately fond. In the rush of joyous feeling in which he pressed Bella to his heart, looking as she did in her radiant beauty and perfect health all that the father's brightest dreams could have anticipated, it is probable that for the moment he altogether forgot the existence of her young companion, who, with natural delicacy and timidity, kept in the background until the greetings between husband and wife and parent and child were over. At all events, as a matter of fact, when Bella did bring her friend forward, Mr. Steel did not meet her without a manifestation of emotion which his wife regarded as altogether beyond what the occasion called for. The first sight of her face seemed to give him a sudden shock. He fastened his eyes upon it—now bathed in blushes, half of embarrassment, half of grateful excitement —with a strangely wistful and troubled gaze. Then with an effort, but half recovering himself, he muttered a few words of commonplace, scarcely coherent, greeting, very different from the well-chosen phrases and the courtly tone, wherein it was hard to say whether stateliness or kindliness predominated, in which his wife had been wont to hear him welcome guests to his house.

What deductions Mrs. Steel may have drawn from all these phenomena it is not for me to determine. But there can be no doubt that she pondered them in her heart, and that they furnished her with many a month's supply of the "cud of fancies," in which there was a remarkably small admixture of sweet ingredients to counteract the bitter. From that moment she saw what a terrible mistake had been made in bringing Grace into her family; and in laudable deference to her own self-love, she at once adopted and thenceforth clung to, with all the tenacity of the female mind, the reasonable and comfortable doctrine that the whole blame rested with her husband, and not in the smallest degree whatever with herself.

We must now give our attention again to the conference which the Commissioner and his wife have been carrying on all the time we have been engaged in this digression.

"We must get her married," said Mrs. Steel, winding up and clinching the long discussion with decision.

"Married!" echoed the poor father plaintively. "Why, we have had her with us barely a twelvemonth, and before that I had not seen her since she was a puny, fading child of seven years old; and now you speak of her leaving us again! Nonsense, my dear. She is not eighteen. It will be time enough to talk of marrying five or six years hence."

"It is never too soon for a young woman to marry," replied Mrs. Steel. "Did not I marry *before* I was eighteen?"

This fact the Commissioner could not deny, and though certain recollections connected with the early years of his married life might have suggested to his mind some qualifications of the implied inference, these were scarcely of a nature which he, being a man addicted to domestic peace and quietness, could prudently advance for his wife's consideration. So he held his tongue.

"Besides," she continued, "there is no reason why Bella should leave us—not for any great length of time, at least. You must be made Lieutenant-Governor when Sir Duncan MacTullub's time is up, and it will be a most convenient arrangement to have your secretary living in Government House with you."

"O," said the Commissioner, smiling, "the reversion of the secretaryship—contingent on my own reversionary interest in the Lieutenant-Governorship—is to be offered as the remuneration of any one who will take our daughter off our hands. Is that your plan, Harriet—to put the two up in one lot?"

"If you choose to make coarse jokes about our child's welfare and happiness, I can't prevent you; but I confess your sneer seems to be even more pointless than usual. I don't see how you can offer a man as remuneration what he has got already."

"Got already! So you have fixed upon the husband too, then?"

"Well, a girl can't marry *without* a husband, I suppose."

"No; that is true. But Wiggins the secretary has a wife already; what do you propose to do with her?"

"O, well, if you are determined to make a jest of the matter, I will say no more. Pray enjoy your joke by yourself. But for my part—"

"My dear Harriet, I was never less disposed to jest in my life, I assure you. But you are talking in riddles. Whom on earth do you allude to?"

"To whom should I allude but Charles Ravensmore, the under-secretary."

"Charles Ravensmore! But he suffers under the same objection as Bella herself: he is too young to think of marrying yet. He is the most rising young man we have, and with his connections and abilities he should have a great future before him. But to burden himself with a wife now would be to handicap his chances too heavily."

"Did marriage stand in the way of your advancement?" demanded Mrs. Steel pertinently.

"Ahem! that is not quite the point," replied the Commissioner, somewhat feebly. "But in short, if Bella has the good sense to fall in love with Charles Ravensmore some four years hence, when she has outgrown the wayward caprices natural to such a mere child as she is yet, and if at the same time she has the good luck to make Charles Ravensmore fall in love with her—well, I shall think she could scarcely do better. In the mean while—"

"In the mean while," interrupted Mrs. Steel, betrayed by the intensity of her maternal excitement into an unwonted flight of metaphor, "you would let the silly lamb amuse itself by playing with the wolf? No," she added, in a tone intended to put a final *clôture* on the debate, "no such risk shall be run if I can help it. I have arranged the whole thing in my mind. I will write this very day to Sir Duncan MacTullub to give Charles a week's leave before the Christmas holidays, and of course he can stay a week after *without* leave; that will make over three weeks with us. And in that time he is sure to fall in love with Bella, and she can't ever think again about the odious Trapton, after seeing such a superior young man as Ravensmore—the nephew of an earl, and who may come into the title himself yet, if his nine cousins should die, as I daresay they may."

And to lose no time, Mrs. Steel got up and went to the drawing-room to write the necessary letters at once.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. STEEL GOES OFF TRIUMPHANTLY WITH THE OLD LOVE, BUT HIS WIFE COMES ON LESS PROSPEROUSLY WITH THE NEW

THE preliminary steps of Mrs. Steel's scheme were accomplished with most encouraging success. Sir Duncan MacTullub graciously accorded her permission to keep young Ravensmore with her as long as she felt inclined; and the brilliant under-secretary himself consented—though more grudgingly, and not without broadly hinting his apprehensions as to the possible, not to say probable, disastrous consequences to the commonweal of so dangerous a step—to absent himself from his office three days previous to the commencement of the Christmas vacation, in order to reach Béshuckabad in time for proposed festivities on Christmas Eve.

The day before Christmas Eve happened to be Mrs. Steel's weekly "tennis afternoon." Shortly before the time for the guests to arrive, the two girls issued forth on the lawn, both most prettily dressed, and with their arms sweetly entwined around one another's waists—on the off chance, probably, of some of the young fellows from the cantonments having come early, and being there to see and appreciate the simple, unaffected grace of the posture. As nobody, however, happened to be there, they quietly unlinked their embrace, and walked up and down the lawn side by side, talking.

"I wish this Mr. Ravensmore, who seems from all accounts to be quite an Admirable Crichton, would arrive in time for tennis," remarked Miss Hawthorn, "though, after all, I suppose he would not play; for, to judge by his answer to your mother's invitation, he seems to consider any form of recreation less solid than the drafting of a resolution on Municipal Reform a most reprehensible misapplication of his time and talents. I fear he would be horrified at so frivolous a proposal as a game of tennis."

"He is being brought here to play quite a different game," answered Miss Steel.

"What game do you mean?"

"Can't you guess? You are either very innocent, Grace, or (what is nearer the mark, I suspect) too much occupied with your *own* little game to attend either to mine or mamma's."

"Your game!" replied Grace; "if you choose so to call your encouragement of that Mr. Trapton, whom I dislike so, you know I am not indifferent to that. I am sure I have warned you over and over again, Bella dearest—"

"Yes, yes, indeed you have," said Bella hastily. "For goodness' sake don't let us hear another homily on that text before I have had time to swallow, much less digest, your last. But don't you really see why mamma has invited Ravensmore? She looks upon him, you know, as quite a compendium—a domestic medicine-chest, in fact—of all the healing virtues; and she wants to use him as an antidote to somebody else, under whose lips the poison of adders is supposed to lie. Or, if you prefer to have the parable in another form—Ravensmore is the bright archangel who has been summoned from the celestial regions of the Secretariat to do battle with Lucifer Trapton for the heart of that very simple Eve, Bella Steel."

And she ended with a ringing laugh. Grace liked neither the jest nor the laugh. There was too much of bitterness in the one and of mockery in the other.

"I believe you flirt with Mr. Trapton," she said, "merely to tease your mother. But have you ever thought, Bella, how it would pain Mr. Steel if he were to observe that you permitted anything like familiarity from such a man? Were it me, I know I would bite out my tongue, or never speak to a man again, rather than do anything to cause Mr. Steel annoyance."

"I should think so, indeed," answered Bella promptly. "You would be horribly ungrateful if you did not, after all you owe to him."

"And don't you owe him as much?" asked Grace.

"O, I am his daughter. It is altogether different with me," said Bella, with a supercilious air.

Just then the earliest of the guests arrived and put an end to their conversation, and soon afterwards the balls were hopping gaily over the nets, and a lively chatter resounded through the mango grove, the pleasant shade of which was soon occupied by a crowd as brightly plumaged and as talkative as the flocks of parrots which its presence scared away.

Grace observed with some uneasiness that Bella refused to play, and looked round anxiously as each successive sound of cantering hoofs up the avenue announced the arrival of a new male guest. Trapton had never been at Mrs. Steel's tennis-parties before, being doubtless conscious that he might not be welcomed very warmly by the gentleman whose intervention had been enlisted to save him from being cashiered. But Grace felt sure that Bella expected him this afternoon; nor was she wrong. For presently she observed Miss Steel's face brighten up, and, looking round, saw the detrimental lieutenant dismounting from his horse.

He was certainly a handsome man, with a somewhat effeminate face, but a fine manly figure. He looked scarcely twenty, though as a fact he was some eight or nine years older. And this was a peculiarity which the ingenuous young man did not fail to turn to many accounts; for besides its constituting, no doubt, one of his attractions in the eyes of Miss Steel, it had lulled into security many an unsuspecting tyro of the card-table, who could never be induced to believe that any very dangerous arts could lie hidden under that shining schoolboy face.

His reputation in the society of Béshuckabad was as ragged as a fakeer's cloak. But his dress was the acme of elegance. He was equally conscious of both facts. But the latter gave him confidence to a very much greater degree than the former abashed him. It was a sight to see the princely air with which he deigned to drop a remark here and there to the prettiest of the women whom he passed on his progress across the lawn, and the loftily good-natured manner in which he spoke a word of encouragement to his own colonel, a man of aristocratic family and of high military reputation, but who had a bad habit of breaking into a profuse perspiration whenever he found himself in a society in which the female sex was represented. The colonel perspired harder than ever at his subaltern's patronising address, but could only reply with an inarticulate gurgle—*possibly* intended to express gratification—and then suddenly turning "threes about," charged the nearest refreshment-table, and buried his head in a "peg" tumbler.

The face of Mrs. Steel, who was sitting by the General's wife—the only lady amongst her guests whose position was sufficiently exalted to make it seemly for the Commissioner's wife to enter into general conversation with her—grew red and lowering as Trapton advanced. And Grace Hawthorn could hardly conceal her vexation at his arrival. But Bella paid no heed to the displeasure of mother or friend, and was actually on the point of rising from her chair, regardless alike of maiden modesty and Mrs. Grundy, and running forward to greet him, when the unexpected interposition of another person checked her, "just as she trembled on the rise." This was her father, whom the exigencies of office usually prevented from putting in an appearance at these gatherings, at any rate until a much later hour than this. On this afternoon, however, by a strange coincidence, he happened to come out just in time to meet Trapton within three yards of Bella's chair.

"O, Mr. Trapton," he said, in the blandest tone, holding out his hand to the young man (whom he had never spoken a word to in his life before), "you are the very man I wanted to see. I am told there is no one who knows more about a horse than you; and there is something wrong with the hock of my new Waler mare, which, I confess, is quite beyond my skill. Do be kind enough to come round to the stable and look at her. I will not detain you long."

If anything *could* have taken Rattley Trapton aback, this unlooked-for reception would have done it. As it was, he actually stammered twice over the dozen words in which he declared the extreme pleasure which it would afford him to place his modest stock of equine knowledge at Mr. Steel's service. And as for the rest of the company (who, of course, knew all about Bella's flirtation, and had formed their own notions as to how the haughty Commissioner would be likely to view it), they were so astonished, that every one simultaneously paused in the middle of the sentence he or she was uttering, and sat open-mouthed. The sudden lull in the buzz of conversation brought Grace to her wits. She jumped up, and with much volubility and bustle set about arranging the sides for a new "set."

When the Commissioner had placed the house as a substantial screen between himself and his companion, and the curious eyes and ears of the party on the lawn, he paused in his progress towards the stables.

"I don't know whether you are aware, Mr. Trapton," he said, "that you, some little time ago, laid me under an obligation."

Trapton replied with perfect sincerity that he was not aware of the fact. "What the devil is the old buffer driving at?" was his mental query, half of contempt and half of suspicion.

"You gave me an opportunity of repaying some kindness and hospitality which I received many years ago at the hands of your uncle, Mr. Goodieshoes."

"Ahem!" replied Trapton, growing very red, for he now understood the allusion.

"I was very glad indeed," resumed the Commissioner, "to employ what little interest I may possess in certain quarters in bringing your affair to a conclusion satisfactory to my old acquaintance. And what I wish now to say to you, Mr. Trapton," and here he fixed those keen eyes of his steadily on the young man's (which, despite his constitutional audacity, drooped, after a brief effort to return the gaze), "what I wish to say to you is, that you may rest assured that I will not hesitate again to use my influence at head-quarters, should I see occasion for it, and I shall do so, I doubt not, with the same success as before. Do I make myself understood?"

"Why, sir, I am not quite sure about that," answered the Hussar. "If you mean to say that you will be ready to pull me through another scrape, all I can say is, that I am much obliged to you for past favours and present good intentions, but I don't intend to give you the chance. I am not going to put my foot into it again—not if I know it."

"No, that was not *exactly* my meaning," said Mr. Steel very dryly. "But are you sure that your foot, as you express it, is quite out of the old quagmire when you speak of avoiding new ones? Unless I take an erroneous view of the matter, what I was able to do was to induce the military authorities to refrain from taking action in a certain matter; there is nothing, so far as I know, to prevent their taking that action now or at any future time, should the considerations which have hitherto withheld them cease, for any reason, to operate."

"Then, sir, am I to take your hint at a further interference in my affairs as a threat?"

"I should not say a 'threat,' but rather a suggestion for your consideration."

"A sort of a 'put that in your pipe and smoke it,' eh? Well, sir, I must say I don't understand the drift of your threat, or suggestion, or whatever you like to call it."

"I think you do," replied Mr. Steel very quietly. "At any rate, I am not disposed to specify it more distinctly. And now, as I am aware that, under the peculiar circumstances which have brought about our acquaintance, it cannot but be embarrassing to you to visit my house, and that you can only have been induced to call with the object of personally expressing your thanks for the slight service I was fortunate enough to be in a position to render you, I will now wish you good-afternoon. I have had your horse brought round, and you can get on to the road this way, which will avoid the awkwardness of your returning to the tennis-lawn before taking your leave."

And so the Commissioner politely dismissed his intrusive guest by the back way.

Mr. Steel had an imposing manner, which, somehow, few people could help giving way before; though some of them would feel some surprise, and not a little anger, after they were relieved from the immediate oppression of his presence, at their own weakness. Trapton was much vexed by such feelings as he rode away, and growled to himself,

"What a d—d idiot, to let the old fogey put me off in this way! Confound his insolence! D—n it, I'll go back to the party;" and he half checked his horse. "But no; I should look a bigger fool than ever going back now. Yes, yes; I understand the old brute perfectly. Curse him! he will tip his friend the C. in C. a wink, and I shall be kicked out of the service, unless I give up his daughter. But I'll be even with him yet. You don't know whom you have to deal with, Mr. Steel; I can tell you that. If I don't succeed in getting that silly girl, before she is many weeks older, to commit herself in such a way that her stuck-up father shall come and beg me to marry her just to save scandal—ay, and bribe me, too, with a rattling big dowry —my name is not Rattley Trapton."

On parting from Trapton the Commissioner did not at once return to the party on the lawn, but went into his office, and finished his day's work. He came out again about an hour later.

A lady of perhaps five-and-thirty, still good-looking, but yet more remarkable for keenness and vivacity of expression, addressed him, eyeing him the while with an inquiring glance,

"What does Mr. Trapton say about the mare's hock, Mr. Steel? What an unconscionable time you have been about your inspection!"

"O dear, no; I have been in office till this moment, Mrs. Archer. I left Mr. Trapton in the stables half an hour ago. I must ask him what he made out about the swelling. Where *is* Mr. Trapton, Grace? Do you see him?"

And Mr. Steel looked innocently around the gay throng in search of his young veterinary adviser.

"He is not here," answered Mrs. Archer, taking the reply out of the mouth of Miss Hawthorn, who was seated beside her. "*We* have seen nothing of your handsome young friend since you carried him off so abruptly; and I assure you, judging from looks," she added, with a momentary but very perceptible glance at Bella, who was seated at some distance, with a brow, in truth, as black as thunder, "some of us are not particularly obliged to you for having done so."

"What! Not come back? Dear me, I never intended to trespass on his good-nature to such an extent. I must see that he does not stay any longer at the stables."

And so Mr. Steel passed on to speak to other guests.

"What is the matter with Miss Steel, Grace?" asked Mrs. Archer; "she seems quite out of sorts."

"Do you think so?" replied Grace, with an innocent attempt to feign surprise and alarm, just as though Mrs.

Archer's sharp eye had not been observing her watching Bella's sulky face with the utmost uneasiness the last half-hour. "Dear me, I hope she is not feeling ill; I must go and see."

Grace tripped round the edge of the lawn to where Bella sat, and, slipping into a chair close by her side, whispered in her ear. Mrs. Archer, contemplating the proceeding with quiet amusement, could scarcely refrain from laughing outright at the sudden savageness with which Miss Steel turned upon her friend, with a few words evidently as sharp as new-set razors, and at the startled dismay with which Grace recoiled, all the blood mantling to her forehead.

"Do you know, my dear," said Mrs. Archer, when Miss Hawthorn had returned to her place, and had sat some minutes with a very absent and subdued air, "do you know, I had quite a shock to-day. You know that dear little pug of mine—real Chinese pug, and *such* a sweet creature; poor thing, she was lying on the sofa this morning, looking so miserable and ill—indigestion, I suppose—and so I went up to her in the greatest concern, and stroked her head, and, putting my face quite close to her, I whispered, in a tone of deep sympathy, 'Poor Flo, what is the matter?' and in reply the gentle creature just turned her head towards me, and, seeming to gaze into my very soul with her lustrous eyes, gave—a snarl and *such* a snap! I assure you, her teeth closed with a report like a saloon pistol not a quarter of an inch from my nose."

"How fortunate it did not bite you!" remarked Grace.

"Yes, was it not?"

"For the dog, you know, I mean," explained Grace. "She would certainly have had her teeth set on edge."

"O Grace, how severe for you!" answered Mrs. Archer, laughing good-temperedly. "But I told you it was the tip of my nose she so nearly bit off, and all the acid of my composition lies, you know, in my tongue. The veins in every other part of my body are filled, I do assure you, with nothing but the sweetest milk of human kindness. But have you found out what is the matter with your friend Miss Bella?"

"O, she is tired, I think."

"What a pleasant sight it is," Mrs. Archer went on, "to see a mother and daughter together, the one so exactly reproducing in fresh blossoms all the most lovely flowers which adorn in their matured beauty the character of the other—the full-blown rose and the bud on one stalk! Now, look at Mrs. Steel; observe the matronly dignity which permits her to drop solemn remarks into the favoured ears of the General's wife, at intervals like a passing bell, but restrains her from the impropriety of bestowing so much as a look upon us inferior people. And then remark the sweet maidenly reserve with which her daughter snubs the common herd of majors, captains, and assistant-commissioners. I suppose, now, she would be quite shocked if a mere subaltern—my handsome friend Trapton, for instance—were to lift his bold eyes above the strings of her tennis-shoes. Eh, Grace, what do you think?"

"I think—well, I think, Mrs. Archer, you are as witty as you are good-natured. But I see they want to make up a set on the far court."

And off Grace went, with an offended air, leaving the placid Mrs. Archer laughing quite good-temperedly at her parting rebuke.

A tennis-party, except for the players, is a dull affair; and quite a pleasurable excitement was presently caused among the lookers-on by the sound of a horse galloping at full speed up the avenue. Some suggested it might be a messenger coming with the news that the Sepoys had mutinied in cantonments. Others thought that it was only Mr. Steel's Waler mare got loose after kiching Rattley Trapton's brains out while examining its hocks. And then there arose quite a fuss and flutter amongst the ladies of the party, when a young man, mounted on a splendid Arab, drew up by the side of the lawn. The "still vexed" tennis-balls had a moment's rest; and in their stead the name of "Mr. Ravensmore" flew backwards and forwards over the nets from mouth to mouth. A stranger seeing the commotion could have had no doubt that Mr. Ravensmore was a young man of "light and leading" in those parts.

Mrs. Steel's unbending dignity relaxed instantaneously. She jumped up from her chair, and waddled across the lawn towards the new arrival with the eager haste of a duck surprised at feeding-time in a distant corner of the farmyard.

"Why, Charles, we thought you were never coming!" she exclaimed, holding out both her hands to him while yet a dozen yards off. "How have you come? Ridden! What, ride all the way from Kantanugger?" (the nearest railway-station to Béshuckabad.) "How tired you must be! Come and have some claret-cup. Bella dearest, bring Charles a glass of claret-cup, or would you rather have a brandy-and-soda? we shall not be shocked if you do. This is my daughter Bella, Charles. I expect you two to be great friends. You are almost like cousins, you know, for your dear mother and I were more than sisters."

Mr. Ravensmore received this exuberance of welcome with much composure. His response to the introduction of his "more than kin," Bella, was, one might have thought, a little "less than kind," it was so very cold and grave.

But Mrs. Steel persevered with admirable pertinacity in spite of his discouraging apathy, and not less in spite of Bella's sullen ungraciousness. For that young lady scarcely even deigned to bend her head in acknowledgment of the introduction.

After many more notes of admiration at young Ravensmore's hardihood in having scorned the luxurious ease of a dawk-carriage, and actually ridden some forty miles, and after tender motherly suggestions that he should at once go to bed and rest from his herculean fatigues, she at last proposed that he should have a game at tennis—he and Bella playing against two other crack performers among the guests. Even Bella brightened up a little at this; tennis was, next to flirtation, her passion. Ravensmore's skill was celebrated throughout the Mâbâp Provinces. So she actually backed up her mother's invitation with some show of interest. But Ravensmore's refusal was decided; how could he possibly play, he said, in boots? Now, Mrs Steel had that very afternoon been exceedingly plain-spoken—of course, she was incapable of being rude—to a lady who had been persuaded to try her hand at the game for the first time, and who, not intending to play, had come to the party in high-heeled boots. Mrs. Steel had then put a very peremptory and speedy stop to an experiment so likely to mar the smooth face of her well-*leeped* courts. But Charles Ravensmore was welcome to play in spiked cricketing-shoes if he liked. Mr. Ravensmore, however, observed that there were other things to be cared for besides Mrs. Steel's courts, and amongst the most important of these was his reputation, the slightest damage to which he could not for a moment think of risking. And Mr. Steel coming up just then, and giving Charles as hearty, though not quite so gushing, a welcome as her own, Mrs. Steel was chagrined to see the veteran Commissioner and young secretary at once plunge into an engrossing discussion of "shop," taking thenceforth no more notice of either her or her daughter than if they had been a dozen miles off.

The amiable Mrs. Archer, we may be sure, had observed and enjoyed this little scene; and, with a true workman's —or rather workwoman's—dislike to seeing a job left half done, she resolved to put a "finish" to it. Accordingly, scarcely had Mrs. Steel returned to her seat by the General's wife, and answered a mild remark or two hazarded by that lady with a brevity and decision which, in another person, might have been called "snappish," when she had the satisfaction of seeing "that bold vulgar woman" (the phrase by which she usually indicated Mrs. Archer) walk up behind Ravensmore, and, undeterred either by decency or the august presence of the Commissioner, tap him on the shoulder with her parasol.

"Familiar was the touch, and told
Marmion and she were friends of old."

The "shop" was at once closed, Mr. Steel (metaphorically speaking) hastily putting up the shutters, and walking away; while Ravensmore and the shameless Mrs. Archer were left standing alone, interchanging ideas much (if one might judge by their complacent expression of countenance) to their mutual satisfaction. But worse was to follow. Mrs. Steel, when introducing her daughter to the newly-arrived visitor, had not deemed it necessary to extend that formality to the other young female member of her family. She thought—that is, if she thought about Grace at all, which is unlikely—that Ravensmore would gather the very slight information which it was necessary for him to possess as to who and what Miss Hawthorn was, by seeing her permitted to take her place with the rest of the family at the dinner-table. But Mrs. Archer's ideas on this subject, as on so many others, did not exactly coincide with those of the Commissioner's lady. And presently the latter saw this audacious creature lead Ravensmore right across the lawn, and, in full view of everybody, present him in due form to Miss Hawthorn.

To the careless observer Mr. Ravensmore's demeanour under this second presentation might not have seemed very different from that which he had displayed towards Bella. There was the same polite but rather stiff bow. But the spirit of matchmaking had sharpened Mrs. Steel's eyes, so that she could see below the surface; and with a pang of rage she detected—or at all events fancied that she could detect—a look of admiration for Grace's lustrous brown eyes and speaking features, which had certainly not been present while he contemplated the statuesque beauty of the fair Bella.

The climax, however, was not reached until, after a few minutes' lively conversation, Grace got up, and, followed by Ravensmore, approached another young lady who was talking to another young gentleman hard by. Two words were exchanged. Ravensmore was supplied with a racquet; and in another moment he and Grace on one side of the net were gaily serving tennis-balls to the other couple on the other side, regardless alike of riding-boots, plastic courts, and reputation!

The laces of Mrs. Steel's corset must indeed have been of tough material to hold out against the indignant swelling of her bosom when her eyes encountered this scandalous spectacle.

CHAPTER VIII.

BELLA STEEL PLAYS TRUANT FROM CHURCH, WHICH LEADS TO SOME UNEXPECTED RESULTS

THE untoward behaviour of the young people at the tennis-party was ony a sample of the perversity which was to vex Mrs. Steel's righteous soul during many subsequent days. Bella remained sullen, and repelled even the acts of ordinary civility which Ravensmore did not, it must be acknowledged, press upon his host's daughter with any undue assiduity, while his attentions to Miss Hawthorn were marked.

Grace received them with simple frankness, never dreaming that she owed them to any other cause than Bella's persistent refusal to allow them to be bestowed upon herself. But assuredly Mrs. Steel did not regard Miss Hawthorn's behaviour in this innocent light.

So things went on over Christmas week, and the peace and goodwill proper to that season were, I am afraid, very far away from Mrs. Steel's bosom throughout the time. On the Sunday following, an occurrence took place which becamea some what important turning-point in the history of the mutual relations of the several members of the Commissioner's household.

Bella had sullenly intimated at tiffin-time that she had a bad headache, and was not going to the evening service.

Ravensmore having been to church in the morning, the idea of going there a second time on the same day did not appear to strike him as within the range of practical human possibilities, and he repaired to his bedroom, to doggedly set to work to pick out the slender and oft-broken thread of sense or purpose connecting a rambling file of official correspondence dating back to somewhere about the time of Macaulay and Lord William Bentinck. Mr. Steel always employed the Sunday afternoon in reading the *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh*. But Mrs. Steel and the girls were regular attendants at both services; and therefore, half an hour before church-time, Grace Hawthorn entered the drawing-room ready dressed to go to the church, which was in cantonments, between two and three miles from their house. But for some reason (which the present chronicler has failed to ascertain) Mrs. Steel had taken it into her head to break through her rule on this particular Sunday, and accordingly appeared in the drawing-room soon after Grace, with the said head unbonneted.

"Are not you ready for church, mamma?" asked Miss Bella, with more alertness than she had of late been in the habit of displaying; "it is quite time. Grace has been dressed the last ten minutes."

"I am not going; so Grace may undress again," was the reply.

"But may not *I* go, if you are not?" asked Grace.

"Go by yourself!" replied Mrs. Steel. "Why, what next, I wonder? Wanting to take the horses all that way? Certainly not!"

Grace looked disappointed, but turned away to leave the room and take off her hat and jacket without another word. But Bella was good-natured when she could be so without much trouble to herself, and said,

"How unkind of you, mamma! You know what a disappointment it is to Grace not to go to church. If you won't let her take the carriage by herself, I will go with her."

And in her usual headstrong way she refused to listen either to Grace's protestations that she did not care about going, or to her mother's warnings that she would certainly make her headache worse, but ran out of the room, ordered the carriage to be brought round within three minutes, at the peril of the coachman's ears or place, or both, and then rushed off to her room to get herself ready in the same limited space.

But from the moment that she took her seat in the carriage by Grace's side, her languor and lassitude returned, and before they had reached the gate of the compound she seemed to be suffering such pain in her head that Grace insisted upon their turning back. Bella said, No; she knew how anxious Grace was to go on, and she did not suppose her headache would get *much* worse; and she concluded with a dismal groan. After a few minutes' argument, a compromise was arrived at. It was decided that Grace should go on in the carriage to church, but that Bella should get out and walk back, for they had not yet got more than a couple of hundred yards beyond the gates of their compound.

So Bella alighted, and Grace drove on. But the latter had not gone far when she bethought her that Miss Steel, ill as she was, ought not to be left to return even that short distance quite alone. So she turned to one of the syces (grooms) who stood behind the carriage (after the fashion of the footmen on our grandfathers' coaches), and told him to get down and follow the Miss Sahib. But he was merely, she said, to keep her in sight, and see that she got home safe; not on any account to follow her closely. For Grace felt by no means certain that Bella might not be annoyed at this excessive solicitude for her safety.

Service over, Miss Hawthorn drove back, and as she neared the house began to prepare herself for the scolding which she felt sure was in store for her for allowing Bella to return, and herself taking the carriage on to church. But to her surprise, as they turned the last corner of the road, she saw Bella standing there waiting for her.

"I wanted to save you from having anything disagreeable said by mamma," remarked Miss Steel as she got into the carriage. "So, instead of going back, I sat under those trees yonder. It was so cool and nice for my poor head, and now mamma need never know that we have not both been to church."

Now, though Grace viewed the character of her benefactor's child through very roseate spectacles, even she was conscious that all this prolonged and disinterested trouble to save another person from a slight disappointment and a trifling censure was not altogether germane to it. A suspicion, or rather a conviction, of the truth flashed across her mind in a moment.

"O Bella," she exclaimed, "you have not met him again, have you? O, say you have not."

But Bella, though she attempted a little half-serious, half-bantering prevarication, would by no means say she had not.

"Mind, Grace," she said, as the carriage drew up under the portico, and now there was no touch of levity in her voice—"mind, Grace, if you let them get the slightest hint that I have not been close beside you ever since we started, if I see you pulling a long puritanical face at anything I say to papa or mamma, as if the world was coming to an end—*mind*, you make me your enemy for life. I will never forgive you, and never rest till I have paid you off. And besides, remember, I have been very kind to you: you would be only a governess now, if it had not been for me; and my meeting Trapton just now would never have occurred but only for my good-nature in saving your being disappointed of going to church."

"Don't be afraid," answered Grace indignantly; "I will neither speak nor look any hints. You and your mother may settle the lie between you; you may tell, and she believe, whatever you both like, without interference from me. After all, it hardly needed your very plain intimation to tell me of the light in which you have come to regard me; your whole behaviour for weeks past might have shown me.

But as dislike to being a governess has not been the motive which has kept me here, I assure you I will remain no longer to be the mere butt of your mother's ill-temper, or a screen for your assignations with Mr. Trapton."

The angry dispute between the two girls was checked by the appearance of Mr. Steel on the top of the steps of the hall-door, just as they descended from the carriage, both with flushed faces and flashing eyes. Having swallowed the political article of the *Quarterly*, he was just going out to walk off the effects in the cool of the evening.

"Hullo! what is this?" said he, catching each by an arm as they tried to hurry past him, one on each side: "you two quarrelling, and just after hearing an excellent sermon too, I have no doubt! Fie, fie! Come for a stroll on the lawn and cool those flushed cheeks. I will walk between you; I am a capital non-conductor of heat."

So saying, he gave each an arm and led them out. He made no awkward inquiries as to who were at church, or what not, but began to amuse them by talking of a variety of things altogether unconnected with present circumstances. So all would doubtless have gone off well but for that unlucky mistake of Grace's in sending the syce after Bella as a body-guard. Indian native servants are about the most perversely stupid blockheads between China and Peru, and, among all native Indian servants, syces hold an undisputed pre-eminence in fatuity. They always do something diametrically opposite to what they have been told, except on those occasions when the intervention of unforeseen circumstances renders what they have been told to do the most obviously wrong thing possible to be actually done. Now, in the present case, one of these latter rare opportunities had presented itself, and the syce had taken full advantage of it by minutely following Grace's instructions to the letter. She had told him to keep Miss Steel in sight until he saw her safe home, but not to annoy her by close attendance. And so effectually had he obeyed this injunction, that he had watched the whole of Bella's long interview with Trapton (who had been waiting for her according to a preconcerted plan, she having intended to steal out while her mother was absent at church). The man now came forward to meet Mr. Steel and the two girls as they turned in their walk up and down the lawn, his squat black face, glittering eyes, and shining teeth beaming all over with the broad grin of conscious merit, and holding out in his clumsy fist a dainty lemon-coloured kid glove, six and a quarter.

"You dropped this under the trees yonder, Miss Sahib, while you were talking to the Sahib, just as you ran back to the road to get into the carriage again."

And as he spoke, he pointed the stumpy forefinger of the other hand in the direction of a grove of mango-trees, which grew at the distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile beyond the compound-wall, and whose tops could just be seen from where they stood.

The incident was embarrassing, and both girls changed colour, but Miss Steel's presence of mind did not desert her.

"It is not my glove; it must be yours, Grace," she said, handing it to the latter. And in confirmation of her statement, she put her hand into her pocket and pulled out a *pair* of lavender kid gloves, folded together. Bella was not a particularly tidy young lady, and frequently left handkerchiefs, gloves, and suchlike in the pockets of her dresses when she took them off, and I grieve to say that she mentally congratulated herself upon that reprehensible habit in the present instance.

Grace took the glove passed to her without a word, and quietly put it in her pocket. Then Bella curtly told the syce to get away, and immediately afterwards said,

"O papa dear, I have almost forgotten to tell you something *so* important. Do you know, Mr. Ravensmore told me to-day that—"

"What! was it Ravensmore you were speaking to in the mango grove?" Mr. Steel interrupted.

"In the mango grove? How do you mean?" asked Bella, with a look of admirably-assumed perplexity.

"Why, where Grace dropped her glove," explained her father.

"O, that must have been in the churchyard," said Bella.

"I thought he pointed to these trees just outside. O, it was in the churchyard you stopped to talk, was it? By the way, how did the grays go this evening? I thought the near one seemed to go a little dull yesterday."

"O no, they rattled us along famously. I don't think it can have taken us much over a quarter of an hour, between the church and this, either coming or going."

This last unnecessary statement Bella added (forgetful of the sage maxim propounded by Captain Absolute for the instruction, in the first instance, of his servant Fag, and secondarily for that of mendacious mankind generally) with a view to impressing upon her father the utter impossibility of her having stopped to talk to any gentleman by the way to or from church.

"Then, Miss Hawthorn," said Mr. Steel, "can you tell me where you *did* drop your glove? For it is certain the syce cannot have brought it all the way from the churchyard on foot in a little over a quarter of an hour. I remarked that there was only one syce with the carriage when you drove up. Eh, where do you *now* think you dropped it?"

"I don't know; I did not know that I had dropped it at all," murmured Grace, with her eyes fixed on the ground.

Bella made no attempt to supply Grace's want of readiness in reply. She saw clearly now that her father's suspicion was aroused, and she knew it would be hopeless to parry that practised lawyer's cross-examination. But this young person's judgment was not less remarkable than her ingenuity; and no sooner did the latter fail her than the former came to her aid. When she perceived that the vessel of concealment was hopelessly leaky, she did not cling to it, as a more timid nature would have done, until she was sucked down and overwhelmed in its vortex when it finally sank, but, while there was yet time, boldly threw herself clear of the wreck, and struck out on the stormy sea of confession and contrition.

"Grace!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "why—*why* don't you tell the truth?" And then, without allowing much time for the adoption of her suggestion, she burst into tears, and laying her head on her father's breast, sobbed out, "Indeed—indeed, papa, I knew nothing about it. I had not a suspicion that he was there when we started. I was not going out at all. I had a bad headache, and intended to stay at home. It was only in order that Grace might go to church—she was so put out and disappointed at not going—that I consented to go with her. And after we started, it was *she* who persuaded me not to go on, but to get out of the carriage and take a walk. You can't deny that every word of what I say is true, Grace," she said, suddenly lifting her face, and looking at Miss Hawthorn with the indignant glance of injured innocence.

Not that Grace showed the slightest sign of intention to offer any denial. She had withdrawn her arm from Mr. Steel's, and was standing with her slight figure drawn up to its full height, her lips firmly compressed, and a glance of scorn—Mrs. Steel, who had been tending her flowers in the verandah hard by, and who, seeing something was wrong, came up just then, called it defiance—flashing from her dark eyes.

"*You* know that it is true, mamma," resumed Bella. "You know that I would not have gone out but for Grace. If any one knew of his being there, *I* did not. My meeting him was quite accidental, and had I been allowed to follow my own wishes, I could not have met him."

"Certainly, Bella," assented Mrs. Steel, with a vindictive look at Grace. "It was Grace Hawthorn who took you out this afternoon, not only against your own will, but against my expressed wish. I had said distinctly that I did not wish the horses taken out again; but, notwithstanding this, Miss Hawthorn thought fit to go to church and take Bella with her. But what has happened?"

"I need not stay, I suppose," said Grace. "Bella and Mrs. Steel are so fully acquainted with my share in what has occurred, that they require no assistance from me."

And saying this, she stalked away with a very haughty air.

We need not listen to the further progress of Miss Steel's shrift, nor to her father's censure. Indeed, to say the truth, the latter by no means rose to the level of the occasion. The Commissioner had, as many a peccant official had learned to his cost, a terrible power of scourging backsliders; but on the present occasion he was so crushed and humiliated by his daughter's incorrigible disobedience, her obstinate perseverance in her unworthy affection for Trapton, and above all, by her ready resort to falsehood, without apparently feeling a qualm of shame in telling a lie, that he scarcely had the heart to utter a few conventional commonplaces.

Bella, much relieved at having been let off so easily, retired with her mother to the latter's bedroom, to do the proper amount of weeping which the occasion required, and Mr. Steel, with his chin resting on his breast, walked moodily towards his business room, at the other side of the house.

"The one spared out of so many," he murmured to himself, "to claim the affections, the interests, the hopes of my evening of life, and she to be thus! So enslaved by a degrading passion as to cast aside truth and honour without a tremor of compunction, without a blush of shame. It is bitter, very bitter. O, the cruel irony of life! Or—or is this my punishment—punishment in kind, under the relentless law of Heaven—tooth for tooth and eye for eye—for one sin, for one error, committed so long ago, and under the stress of fierce temptation and bewildering perplexity? Surely the madness of a few months in mere boyhood might have been atoned for by an after life of unblemished rectitude. Truly the punishment is greater than the offence!"

He entered his room, and seating himself at the table, littered with dockets and blue-books, leant his head upon his hand. He sat thus motionless, deep in thought, for nearly an hour. But strange as it may seem, it was not Bella's delinquency which now filled his thoughts and clouded his brow with a shadow of the deepest gloom. No; the particular direction which his daughter's faults had taken had rudely struck a chord in his conscience which it had been the determined, though perhaps unconscious, effort of his strong will for twenty years to protect from impact; but the magic string once touched, his mind rushed back upon the past with irresistible force. The present scene faded like an "unsubstantial pageant." Present cares, affections, disappointments, shrivelled into nothing. And the image of the softly, spiritually lovely face and form imprinted on his mind's eye as he sat there bore no more resemblance to the fair features of Bella, than the background of wild moorland, from which he stood out, resembled the richly-wooded level plain of Béshuckabad.

"But why should I condemn myself?" he said at length, the vehemence of his mental struggle unconsciously finding an outlet in half-audible words. "Why should I condemn myself? It was not my act, my wish, my passion which led me to her on that fatal night. Did I not merely respond to her own passionate, frantic summons? My design—the design which had its origin in my will and my passions, and for the consequences of which alone I can be held responsible—had been shattered, overthrown; ay, toppled over," he continued—and as he muttered the words, his clenched teeth showed how the wound ached even after the lapse of so many long years—"toppled over on my own head, leaving me crushed under a load of humiliation that I shall carry with me to the grave. My purpose, with whatever it had of madness—and of that there assuredly was enough—or whatever of guilt—and at this day, not more than at that, can I in my own heart analyse or gauge the antagonistic elements of that wild passion—my purpose had proved abortive. What ensued was no consequence of it. The terrible train of events which followed that night, so far as my share in them is concerned, had a fresh starting-point then; they were separated by a gulf of total and complete revulsion of feeling from all I had felt, or contrived, or dreamed before. But for her letter, I had never seen her face again, and O, would to God that I had not! But it was impossible for me to disregard such an appeal. Heaven knows at that moment I was little in the mood to respond to it with alacrity. But she implored me, conjured me by the memory of our old love, to help her in her sore strait. And what means of help had I but that which I used? what refuge, in the desperate position in which she stood, could I offer but that which I did? 'Despair, in which human aid was well-nigh altogether hopeless'—those were her words; and had I, mere boy as I was, more than a human judgment, a stronger than human heart to bring to her aid? But those were her very words."

And as he repeated this phrase, he rose, and opening a desk, took out an envelope, on which the ink of the address was faded with age. He was about to take out the letter which it contained, as he resumed his seat at the table, apparently with the unnecessary purpose of confirming the accuracy of his recollection of the words upon whose literal sense he placed such great importance. But his hand paused in the middle of its movement. He hesitated, and seemed to contend with a feeling of dread or repugnance to look upon the contents of the envelope. And at last he laid it unopened on the table before him, and, leaning back in his chair, resumed his troubled meditations.

He was aroused from his reverie by the voice of Grace Hawthorn just outside the curtain which hung before the door, asking if she might come in. He started violently at the sound. And his preoccupation must have been intense, judging from the unusual disturbance which seemed to agitate him for several moments after she had entered the room. Grace's own agitation, however, left her in no case to observe that of anybody else. She was very pale, her lips trembled, and she made several ineffectual efforts to speak before she succeeded in articulating a word. At last she managed to get out,

"Don't think me ungrateful, Mr. Steel. But I want to go—I must go—my staying can lead to nothing but—but—but wretchedness."

Mr. Steel had now quite recovered his self-possession. He rose, took Grace's hand in one of his own, while he laid the other on her shoulder, and with exceeding kindness placed the gasping, palpitating girl in a chair. Then, still holding her hand, he said, with a tender softness quite strange to the usual quick, decisive tones of his voice,

"You are distressed and hurt by that unhappy scene this evening. I understand the motives which have prevented your explaining circumstances which seemed, or were made to seem, to cast suspicion upon you. And I thank you for your generous intention in keeping silence, Grace. Nevertheless, your silence is as unavailing to deceive me as that poor child's pitiable prevarications. I know well that the glove which the syce brought is Bella's, not yours. And I am perfectly sure that her meeting with this man, whether prearranged, or (as I would feign believe it to have been) accidental—on all parts, that is, but his—was at any rate without your knowledge or connivance. Therefore, Grace, let not any feeling that you have incurred my displeasure or distrust disturb you. And now, my poor child, go to your own room and compose yourself; for in half an hour it will be dinner-time, and we must not let our visitor guess that there has been all this turmoil amongst us."

Grace thanked her guardian warmly for his generous belief in her innocence, but she continued to press her entreaty to be allowed to leave a family in which she was an object of distrust and dislike to at least one principal member of it. She was now able to express herself on this subject more coherently than her agitation had allowed her to do when she believed that she had to make her appeal to a benefactor who might reasonably consider himself treated by her with outrageous ingratitude. She referred with delicacy to Mrs. Steel's uniform behaviour towards her, palliating it as much as possible, and ascribing it to an excusable sense of the irksomeness which any woman would be apt to feel in having a person who was a perfect stranger in blood or affinity, and a very recent acquaintance in person, permanently admitted into the innermost circle of her family life. And deeply grateful as she was for Mr. Steel's past benefits, she felt that to continue to be dependent upon the bounty of one on whom she had no kind of claim was inconsistent with self-respect. She begged, therefore, that Mr. Steel would let her return to England. She had the assurance—earnestly and heartily given, on the eve of her voyage to India—that her old schoolmistress would be glad to receive her back as governess. This was, in brief, the purport of her appeal, though the reader must suppose that she expanded it with the exuberant eloquence natural to her age and sex.

As I have said, Mr. Steel had been most adverse to Grace Hawthorn entering his family. He had foreseen much of the inconvenience, jealousy, and ill-feeling which had resulted from it. And certainly experience had more than confirmed the justice of his original fears. He would gladly have hailed the opportunity to put any fitting end to the arrangement. For instance, had the chance of a suitable marriage for Grace presented itself, he would have encouraged it by every means in his power. To have given her away in marriage to a worthy husband would have afforded him a twofold satisfaction of the highest kind. It would put the fitting coping-stone to the generous task which he had undertaken and so faithfully persevered in for many years. And it would relieve him of an embarrassment of a most galling kind which he had little foreseen that the performance of this task was to involve.

But that the friendless girl whom he had undertaken to protect should be driven from his roof by unkindness and unmerited suspicion was a very different matter. There was something in the suggestion of such an idea which deeply stung his self-love.

"You must not speak of leaving this house, Miss Hawthorn," he said with decision, and indeed with some sharpness, "until you leave it for a home of your own. Till then you must look upon my house as in every sense your home, and on me as your guardian. And if you find here some things difficult to bear, remember that few persons are so fortunate as to find even in the homes in which they have been born a total absence of such trials. Those difficulties and vexations which you find here have been set before you by Providence, you may be sure, to be overcome or borne, and not to be run away from."

"But it is not that," persisted Grace. "I am ready to face difficulties and vexations. And I have not complained of any—as indeed I have no right to—that may have fallen to my lot here; no, not even in my own heart have I allowed myself to complain—so long as I felt I was of some use, and could make some return, however small, for all your unmerited kindness to me. But now I feel sure that I can no longer do this. My presence here is a cause of strife; I know it. Mrs. Steel distrusts me, and Bella—Bella—"

But she could not quite hit off the right word for Bella's feeling towards her, so left the sentence unfinished.

"You do more services than you think," answered the Commissioner kindly. "But that is nothing to the purpose. Your claim, your duty, to regard this house as your home rests on no service of any kind required of you. Think that you have the same rights here as Bella."

"But that is impossible, Mr. Steel. I know that I am not related to you even distantly. Nor can I even be the child of a dear friend."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Steel sharply.

"Because," answered Grace, "I know this much of my parentage, that my mother, though her parents were gentlefolk by birth, was brought up in a rank in society very far inferior to yours. And," she added, in a very low voice, "my father could never have been your friend because—you are good."

Mr. Steel got up and walked about the room, as he always did when he was agitated. After a silence of some minutes he said,

"Your last inference is true, though the premiss would scarce pass scrutiny. Your father, my child, was indeed such an one as could have been no good man's friend. To me, however little pretension I may have had to that title, he was assuredly none; but rather, I may truly say, my bitterest enemy. But as to your mother, you are wrong. A great difference in social position may be, as you say, a gulf impassable to mere friendship; but there is a feeling, Grace, to which the widest chasm which the whole social scale can interpose between two human beings is as a scratch in the sand. Your mother was once dear, very dear, to me."

"What! did you know her?" exclaimed Grace eagerly. "My mother, whom I never saw, but none can know how dearly I have loved! you knew her, then? O, Heaven has been kind to me, and, orphan as I have been from my birth, surely goodness and loving-kindness have followed me all my life. I have never been without the affection of loving friends, from good Mrs. Hawthorn's, who watched over my infancy, to yours, my latest and best friend. But—ungrateful though it may be to say it, it is the bare truth—I would exchange it all, every word of love and sympathy that my memory can recall, to have once known my mother, to have the power to bring back to mind one feature of her face, to hear in fancy the faintest echo of *her* voice."

"Nature, my child, has already given you that power," answered Mr. Steel, "without demanding any such sacrifice as its price. Glance in the looking-glass, speak in that sweet soft voice in which you spoke even now, and the old Mary Lee of two-and-twenty years ago will stand before you. You are the living likeness of your mother, Grace. May Heaven in its mercy grant that life may have in store for you a future far different indeed from her most unhappy fate."

"Mary Lee? Was that her name? I did not even know it. Mrs. Hawthorn told me some of her sad story, but would never reveal her name, nor that of my father. What—what was—his? But why should I ask?" she added, interrupting herself.

"Why, indeed?" he said; "much better that it should for ever be buried in oblivion. But, now you know the claim which you have on my protection, speak no more of leaving me. And, Grace, never again let us recur to the subject of which we have just spoken. To look upon that dark past is fruitless—fruitless—and I cannot recall it without emotions which—which—well, enough; let us speak no more of it."

But Grace yearned to hear more of that ill-starred mother who had been so mysterious, so sad, but yet so beloved a shadow in her dreams. Yet even at such a moment, when one might have expected that the new light which had so suddenly burst upon her would have blinded her to all considerations but her own impatient curiosity, her habitual unselfish delicacy of regard for the feelings of others asserted itself. After the confession into which Mr. Steel had been surprised, and the evident emotion with which he had made it, she could not but feel that to pursue her inquiries about her mother must still more seriously affect his peace of mind, already, it was plain to see, painfully disturbed. With a sigh, therefore, she choked back the stream of questions which welled up from her full heart.

But a thought came to her relief. As Mr. Steel had known and loved her mother so well, was it not possible that he might have some scrap of her handwriting, some token—anything tangible which she might cherish as having once belonged to or once been touched by the beloved hand? She asked him, and as she did so his eyes instinctively turned towards the letter which he had laid on the table shortly before she entered. Her eager eye instantly interpreted the glance. She sprang forward, and clutched the faded envelope.

"O, is this her writing? May I see—ah! may I keep it—only the envelope?" she cried imploringly.

"It is hers," he replied; "the only letter I have kept. Take it, my dear, and keep it, but do not read it here; read it alone. It will affect you deeply. It is a sad—more than sad—letter, and was written at a terrible crisis in your mother's life. But ask me no questions—no explanations—I could not bear to speak, and it were bootless for you to know; one thing, however, it will prove to you—the trust which your mother once had in me. It will be, as it were, an injunction laid upon you by your mother herself, from her grave, to regard me in the light of your true father."

Grace had no wish now to prolong the conversation. She hurried with her treasure to her own room and locked herself in. It is needless to say she did not appear at the dinner-table that day. As Bella's feelings had also been too much lacerated by the occurrences of the evening to permit of taking sustenance except in perfect seclusion, Ravensmore might have been left to attribute the absence of the two girls to the headache of the one and the tender sympathy of the other. But Mrs. Steel's conscience was too scrupulous to connive, even by silence, at such a deception, or to allow Grace to get credit for good-nature which she did not deserve; so she was careful to inform him, with a significant pursing up of the lips, that Miss Hawthorn had been favouring them with a display of temper, and was now, she presumed, depriving them of the pleasure of her society as a punishment for not letting her turn the house upside down, and enjoying the amiable pastime of riding rough-shod over the meek and patient lady who presided over it. Had the conventionalities of civilised society not restrained Ravensmore from uttering aloud the comment which he inwardly passed upon this piece of information, Mrs. Steel would probably have come to the conclusion that she would have done more wisely, after all, to leave him to draw his own inference from the girls' absence, even at the risk of his imputing undeserved merit to Miss Hawthorn. No harm would have been done by this but what had already become past praying against. Ravensmore required no fresh instance to confirm his conviction of Grace's perfect amiability; of that he had quite made up his mind. But her own cheerfulness and good-humour had hitherto prevented his fully realising the fact that she was the object of Mrs. Steel's vulgar and domineering ill-temper. But the malignant tone in which the latter now spoke of her opened his eyes. And thus a new faggot was thrown into the flame which already was burning pretty briskly in his heart. Mrs. Steel should have remembered the time-worn adage about pity's relationship to love.

Grief and shame—not to speak of headache—did not deprive Miss Steel of her appetite, as was proved, if we may trust to circumstantial evidence, by two large helps of roast beef, with entrées, pudding, and dessert, which were carried to her penitential cell. But Grace Hawthorn was too much engaged with other food to think of that which came from the dinner-table. She was reading her mother's letter over and over again, pondering, conjecturing, perplexing herself upon every word. It was indeed a wild, incoherent, unintelligible production; truly a sad and ominous thing to be the sole relic left to a child of the parent whom she had never known. It ran thus:

"Dear George,—Kindest and most ill-requited of friends, as you would find mercy yourself at the last day, be forgiving to one who is even now encompassed by the shadow of death. O, would that the darkness of the grave already covered me! Do not refuse to come to me; my last, my only hope is in you in my despair, in which human aid is well-nigh altogether hopeless. Think of old times; forget the madness, the horrible delirium of the last few months, and come to me. Meet me in the side path of the churchyard at eight o'clock; it is the only time when I can be sure of a few minutes unwatched by my father.—Your wretched but once loved MARY LEE.

"For pity's sake, George, forgive and come."

CHAPTER IX.

TO-MORROW TO FRESH FIELDS AND PASTURES NEW.

AFTER the proof which this Sunday afternoon had afforded of Mr. Rattley Trapton's audacity, and alike of Bella's obstinate resolution and unscrupulous cunning in the pursuit of her infatuation, Mrs. Steel prudently determined to get her away for a time from Béshuckabad. All that was needed for the success of her scheme, she felt convinced, was "a fair field and no favour;" but obviously these indispensable conditions could not be obtained in the immediate neighbourhood of the quarters of the —th Hussars. Accordingly, when they had retired that night, she said to her husband,

"Are not you going into camp, George, now that Christmas is over?"

"Not for a week or two, my dear," answered the Commissioner.

"Why not? I am sure you ought to be looking after your districts, or you will have that lazy fellow Easington getting things into a muddle again; and of course all the blame falls on you, and quite right too, for not having him turned out when you had a chance last year."

"I think," answered Mr. Steel mildly, "Easington had a lesson then which he will not so soon have forgotten. Besides, I visited his district the other day; I was there just before you returned from the Hills. At any rate, I could not leave Béshuckabad for the next fortnight; I have most important work to attend to here."

"I tell you, you have much more important work to attend to *away* from here," replied his wife.

"How do you mean?"

"To get Bella away from that scamp, of course."

"O, I will take good care that there shall be no repetition of to-day's proceedings. If Bella is so foolish and so —well, in short, if she cannot employ the liberty ordinarily accorded to a girl of her age without indulging in escapades which may compromise her, she must be content to have that liberty restricted."

"That is not enough," answered Mrs. Steel impatiently. "*I* shall take good care that she has not another chance of meeting Trapton. But unless you lock her up in the godown, neither you nor I can prevent her *seeing* the fellow. Out of sight is the only way of getting him out of her mind, take my word for it."

"But, my dear, I heard you this very evening," urged the perplexed father, "ask Ravensmore to prolong his visit till the 15th, and I understood him to accept your invitation, provided he can get his leave extended, of which I have no doubt. We can't possibly go away and leave him."

"Of course not. He will go with us."

"Go with us! I am afraid, Harriet, you might find you were reversing the old proverb, and reckoning without your guest. Charles Ravensmore may be willing enough—though certainly I am surprised even at that in a young man of such sedate character—to waste another fortnight in balls, and tennis-parties, and picnics at Béshuckabad; but as to spending the same period with us camping out in the jungles—I suspect he would regard your invitation from a very different point of view."

"*How ever* you came to get the reputation of being clear-sighted, George, is indeed a mystery to me! Charles Ravensmore cares as little for balls and picnics as you do—a great deal less, indeed. To ride a march," went on Mrs. Steel—and spitefulness seemed to grate in the tones of her voice as she spoke—"to ride a march along a dusty *kutcha* road by the side of Grace Hawthorn would be a greater attraction to him than all the picnics that ever have come off since Adam and Eve left the garden of Eden!"

"But," said Mr. Steel, more puzzled than ever, "I was certainly under the impression that that particular pleasure—if you are really right in supposing that he would regard it so highly—is about the last you would desire to gratify him in, and rightly so; for scarcely anything more calculated to produce unhappiness for both could occur than the growth of any feeling of regard between two persons so ill suited by their circumstances to each other as Ravensmore and Miss Hawthorn."

"Though you never lose an opportunity," replied Mrs. Steel, "of showing your contempt for my understanding, yet I am not quite such a fool as you take me for. No," she continued grimly; "once we get Charles into camp with us, he shall see very little more of Miss Grace Hawthorn. The Easingtons will be glad, on a hint from me, to give her an invitation to stay with them for as long as we remain out. And then, when Charles and Bella have neither of them absolutely anybody else to fall back upon, why, they *must* come together."

Mr. Steel could not forbear a slight laugh at this triumphant conclusion, which of course elicited the usual gentle reproach from his meek spouse regarding the levity with which he chose to treat the dearest interests of his daughter's happiness.

"However, my dear," he said, recalled to becoming gravity, "your plans, as I have said, are impossible, as my duties necessarily detain me here for the present; or, if it were possible for me to get away at all, I must go first of all to Diknugger, and you would scarcely care either to accompany me yourself, or, much less, ask any guest to come with you, to that dullest and dreariest of little stations."

"O, what was I thinking of!" exclaimed Mrs. Steel. "Of course, Diknugger is the very place to go to; and we can leave Grace there with the Baytrees, while we take Charles on, and give him some shooting."

"Ravensmore is such a keen sportsman, my love, that he would regard as a compliment your carrying him off to finish his visit in the Diknugger jungles, so say no more about it, and—good-night."

"Yes, yes, *that* is the plan. You know Shafto, the assistant police-officer at Diknugger, was very much smitten with Grace last summer, at the Hills. Perhaps I never mentioned it to you, but he was on leave at the Hills while we were there, and paid her *great* attention. And she—(Miss Grace," remarked Mrs. Steel, with a parenthetic sneer, "was modest in her views in those days, before she had flown at under-secretaries and earls' nephews, and did not think a Staff Corps lieutenant and assistant in the police on three hundred rupees a month, altogether below her notice)—she seemed nothing loth to receive and repay all the attention he was willing to bestow on her. O," she concluded, with an energy which quite woke up her hushand, who had been on the point of falling off asleep—" O, if he would only propose to her, and rid us of her presence! I'd gladly give him a thousand pounds along with her!"

"Are you sure of this, Harriet?" asked the Commissioner, with animation. "Do you really think Mr. Shafto had any idea of proposing for Grace, and that she liked him, or is this one of your matrimonial chimeras?"

Mrs. Steel assured him that there could not be a shadow of a doubt about it. Last summer young Shafto had made such love to Miss Hawthorn that it was the talk of the whole station, and the young lady had most certainly at that time exhibited no outward manifestations of repugnance, whatever she might do now that her head had been filled with the silly hopes raised by Ravensmore's thoughtless behaviour.

"Indeed," said Mr. Steel, when the matter had been so fully and particularly expounded to him that he could no longer suspect it to be the mere fabric of his imaginative wife's fancy—"indeed, I am heartily glad of this. Grace could not make a more suitable choice. I like young Shafto much—a trifle too outspoken and independent, perhaps, for his age and position, but a gentlemanly, sensible young fellow, nevertheless. I have had thoughts before this of getting him appointed to the Commission; he is too good for the police. And if there were any idea of his marrying

Grace, of course this could easily be managed. He comes of a good north-country family, too, so there would be no objection on the score of birth."

"Of *birth!*" echoed Mrs. Steel, with withering emphasis; "I should think not, indeed! Miss *Hawthorn*" (another marked accentuation on the name) "runs little risk of marrying beneath her in that respect, if she finds the son of any honest woman to take her."

"I hope, at any rate," replied Mr. Steel, apparently repressing with some difficulty a warmer answer, which rose to his lips, and caused them to twitch, "that the man she finds may himself be an honest man, for an honester and truer-hearted girl than Grace Hawthorn does not exist. Well, if I have any skill in judging character, she has chosen well in young Shafto, as, indeed, we might have expected from her good sense and good feeling."

"Good fiddlesticks!" retorted Mrs. Steel, "or good fiddle-*strings!* Miss Grace tries to have as many of them to her bow as she can get hold of, and she will just choose the richest of the simpletons who are taken in by her demure coquetry."

"Well, well, there is no occasion for us to discuss her character. But let us give every facility we can for bringing about a match with Shafto; about the suitability of that, at least, we are both agreed."

But whether it was that Mrs. Steel's matrimonial projects could not live if deprived of the aliment of contradiction with which her husband was wont to feed them, or whether her spite against Grace was so overpowering that it would not allow her to continue her aid in securing the girl a husband whose qualifications had been described in such flattering colours by the Commissioner, and her selection of whom had elicited such a warm encomium, certain it is that Mr. Steel's last proposition was promptly repudiated by his wife.

"We are not agreed at all. *You* may think it right to scheme and manœuvre to entrap a deserving young man into a marriage with your *protégée*—I know well that you hold the vile, heartless *man's* maxim, that all is fair in love—but *I* have a conscience, and I will not be dragged into participation in any such conspiracy."

"There is no occasion for your being so, my dear," answered Mr. Steel dryly. "Your leaving things quite alone will probably be the most effectual assistance you can render Grace. Your active interference in your own fanciful plan for capturing Charles Ravensmore has not been so successful as to encourage further experiments of the kind on Shafto. However, we will, as you suggest, at once pay a visit to Diknugger."

"No, we will not," answered Mrs. Steel impetuously.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," replied the Commissioner quietly, "we will; so be good enough to arrange for going into camp on Tuesday."

The dominions of the Commissioner of Béshuckabad were divided into four districts, over the government of each of which was placed a Deputy. Besides the metropolitan district of Béshuckabad—the Deputy Commissioner of which, Mr. Small, shone with rather a dim light under the immediate effulgence of the Commissioner himself—there were the districts of Kooch Purwarneepore, presided over by the Mr. Easington of whom mention has been made by Mrs. Steel in the course of the just-recorded dialogue; the district of Johookumgunj, whose satrap was Colonel Fitz Bang, a fierce and a fiery "military-civilian," with a St. Vitus' dance, which, I very believe, was the secret of half the terror with which his wrath was regarded by his trembling subjects; and lastly, the district of Diknugger, the administration of which was committed to the care of a very astute officer of considerably junior standing in the service to those above-named: also a military-civilian, Captain Greene Baytree.

Most people would doubtless have thought this last-named district, Diknugger, the least attractive part of the

Commissioner's territories, for much the greater portion of it consisted of a vast desert, partly bare, and partly overgrown with low trees and scrub jungle, over which ranged huge herds of cattle and camels, tended by a semi-nomad and wholly predatory race of graziers. Here and there were scattered villages of a permanent sort—some, indeed, very ancient, and many of them large and prosperous, in a rugged, barbarous way. Around these were more or less extensive patches of cultivated fields. But the general aspect of the country was, to an extraordinary degree, what Hamlet found the usage of the world, "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable." But as a mother most surely lavishes the tenderest of her love upon the deformed and ugly child, which strangers can only regard with pity not unmixed with disgust, so Mr. Steel cherished the grim flat of Diknugger more than all the smiling cornfields, the wooded uplands, and verdant valleys of the more richly endowed districts of his division.

Probably one great reason for his preference was that the other parts of his charge were easily managed, while the political as well as the physical conditions of Diknugger contained chronic elements of difficulty, which afforded continual exercise for those administrative faculties upon which he prided himself. There was a large though scattered population, always liable to be suddenly plunged by a failure of rainfall, or other calamity of season, into the abyss of actual famine. And this state of things could only be remedied by the systematic and persevering opening out of the remote recesses of the vast and almost pathless waste by roads, and by encouraging the simple, improvident inhabitants to abandon their lazy pastoral—and still more immoral plundering—habits, the inveterate growth of centuries, for the distasteful labours of (comparatively) scientific agriculture. This was the great physical and social problem which interested Mr. Steel in Diknugger. But there was also a political one which still more fascinated him. And as it happened that the personages and feelings involved in this latter question came to be entangled to some extent in the thread of the humble domestic history which I have undertaken to narrate, I must ask the reader's patience while I give a very brief sketch of the political "situation" in Diknugger.

It is possible, then, my dear reader, that you may not have forgotten a picturesque, but not especially cleanly, old gentleman, with whom the Commissioner of Béshuckabad was closeted when I took the liberty of admitting you into his private business-room at the beginning of my fifth chapter. This person, old Kumbukt Khan, was the descendant, and present very much diminished head, of a family which had held, virtually, sovereign sway over a tract of country which had varied considerably in extent at different periods. For some hundred years and more, however, immediately preceding that happy revolution out of which arose, like a phœnix from red ashes of war and devastation, and brooded over the happy land, the maternal wings of the government of the Mâ Bâp Provinces, this principality had never comprised a less extensive territory than that which now constituted Mr. Steel's division. Kumbukt Khan's remote ancestors had been merely the chiefs of a clan, or the leaders of a band of robbers, called the Moofsids, who occupied the wildest part of the jungle of Diknugger, where the vast tract of level wilderness merged into a broken country of low bare hills and dark ravines. Just where these two different but equally unlovely aspects of the landscape were "at odds, which was which," stood a grim tower of dull old brick, not unlike a Northumbrian "peel." This was Gurhi Moofsid, the "Moofsids' Fort," and had been the earliest stronghold, or robbers' den, of the tribe. Thence for many ages they had been in the habit of sallying forth, their march and its direction effectually masked by the blank screen of the pathless jungle, and swooping down on the unprepared and unprotected towns and villages of the rich country beyond. Then, laden with plunder, they were off, and lost in the vast labyrinth of scrub long before an armed force could be got together to capture them. It was seldom that the police or military of the state ventured to follow them through so dangerous a country. But when they did so, and in such force as to put an attempt at ambuscade out of the question, they found at the end of their toilsome march nothing to crack their teeth upon but the empty and very hard shell of the nut they had come to look for, to wit, the four-feet-thick brick wall of the keep, and the impracticable mud rampart of the courtyard, of Gurhi Moofsid. For the bandits themselves, with their wives and their little ones, and—what was more to the purpose—their flocks and their herds of stolen cattle, and their jewels of silver and jewels of gold, purchased at the cheap cost of a knock on the head paid to some worthy goldsmith of Béshuckabad or Kooch Purwarneepore, were "over the hills and far away," or—which is more probable—quite as hopelessly beyond the reach of pursuit among the windings of some dark ravine close at hand.

But during the general anarchy which accompanied the decay of the Moghul Empire, the chief of the Moofsids developed the ancient predatory system of his forefathers into one of conquest. And in the course of a few years he left—"for good," as he doubtless fondly supposed—the rough security of his jungle fastness, to establish himself in state and luxury in the castle of Zoolumkote, a splendid pile, originally built as a shooting-box by one of the royal family of Delhi, but more recently occupied, and greatly enlarged and embellished, by the successive governors of the province under the Imperial rule.

When the steady progress of British conquest approached that part of India, the grandson of this chief, Kumbukt Khan, still held the principality which his ancestor had founded. When the inevitable crisis came, Kumbukt Khan, then in the prime of life, and preëminent even in a line of headstrong, proud, and violent warriors for turbulence, arrogance, and savage cruelty, threw himself heartily into the confederacy of chieftains who, resenting or dreading the propinquity of the British bayonets to their borders, rashly threw themselves upon them, and got pitchforked off their thrones and out of their estates for their pains.

Now, there was also another member of the ruling Moofsid family, a cousin some degrees removed from Kumbukt Khan, who took a prominent part in the war against the English. He, too, was distinguished by many commanding qualities, but not such qualities as those which had been wont to embellish his race. Indeed, the character of this scion of a family was so diametrically opposite to the common genius of the Moofsid blood, that it might have been difficult to account for it but for the following circumstances. His father, a bluff old Moofsid noble, had married decidedly late in life a beautiful maid of low degree. She in due time presented him with a fine boy, who—as there is no saying *what* boys will not do—"took after" his mamma's family very much more than his papa's. Lomri Khan (for so the promising fruit of this auspicious union was named) grew up to be the "'cutest" young man who had ever been known in those parts. He outwitted the wily bunniah who had been in the habit of managing Kumbukt Khan's fiscal affairs, and allowing that prince and his predecessors for the last fifty years or so about one-fourth of the amount of the taxes and cesses which he wrung out of their subjects. The bunniah retired in righteous disgust, after being made to disgorge untold lakhs of rupees, and the grateful prince established the virtuous and ingenious Lomri in his place. But whether Kumbukt Khan had much reason to congratulate himself on the change may be doubted; for, though the peasants and shopkeepers were not long in discovering that Lomri's little finger was thicker than the bunniah's loins, his cousin found no corresponding swelling in the volume of the stream of revenue which was allowed to filter into the state coffers. However, before whatever dissatisfaction he might have felt shaped itself into any practical form—such as the cutting of Lomri's throat, or the putting out of his eyes, and torturing his wives and children with a view to discovering the hiding-place of his strong box, or any similar outward manifestation of annoyance—the English war broke out, and gave Kumbukt Khan something else to think about.

Lomri was too clever a man, in a camp where heavy fists were more plentiful than quick wits, not to be intrusted with an important command, and he soon justified his promotion by obtaining a decisive success. Leading his brigade out, under cover of a dark and stormy night, he conducted it in silence and secrecy into the very heart of the British camp. When morning dawned, the surprise was complete, and was quickly followed by a crowning victory. I should, however, perhaps explain that it was Kumbukt Khan who felt the surprise; the victory fell to the share of the English commander.

After the confederacy was hopelessly shattered, Kumbukt Khan, with that truculent obstinacy with which we have heard Mr. Steel reproach him, retired to his native wilds, and thence for several months continued to prolong the war in a guerrilla fashion. When he was at length brought to bay, the conqueror's patience had been worn pretty nearly threadbare; and it was generally thought the troublesome chief was lucky in being left with a whole skin, as much of the tough old walls of Gurhi Moofsid as had been proof against our engineers' powder-bags to shelter it behind, and a few hundred acres of jungle and ravine for the production of milk, ghee, beef, and chupatties wherewithal to fill it.

The discreet Lomri Khan's fate was quite different. He received as the just reward of his loyalty and valour—that best part of valour which is proverbially distinguished from mere brutal insensibility to danger—the splendid castle of Zoolumkote, from which his cousin had been ejected, and large estates—one lying near the castle, and another, less rich but more extensive, sliced off Kumbukt Khan's ancient patrimony in the neighbourhood of Gurhi Moofsid. For many years after the annexation of the country he continued to be the honoured friend and trusted adviser both of the

Governor-General of India and of the Lieutenant-Governor of the Mâ Bâp Provinces; and when he died, full of years and honours, some six or seven years before the date which we have now reached in our story, he bequeathed to his son, a boy of ten, an immense fortune, and the titular dignity of "Nawab."

It will easily be understood that the course of events which I have sketched had sown in the political and social field of the Diknugger district the seeds of difficulties as prolific as convolvuluses, as well as those of more serious dangers, which, though germinating slowly underground and out of sight, might at any moment spring up with startling suddenness. The hatred between the fallen Kumbukt Khan and his pampered cousin was of course implacable. And while the Nawab and his hangers-on were perpetually endeavouring by secret intrigue to complete the ruin of the decayed chief, and the total erasure of his name and race from the face of Diknuggerian affairs, there was always, on the other hand, a possibility that even in his ashes might yet glow some spark of the wonted fires which had once blazed so ardently in the breast of the old Moofsid warrior. Or even if his own turbulent courage was quite burnt out in the socket, he had two sons, as dangerous young fellows as could be found anywhere. They had inherited full portions of the patrimonial truculence; they had been too young at the time of the English war to learn the wholesome lessons which that course of lectures had imparted to their elders; and having been brought up in the wild seclusion of Gurhi Moofsid, they were entirely ignorant of the real world, and indeed had derived their sole notions of politics from the legends which they heard of their ancestors as robbers and conquerors, and from the doctrine—religiously cherished and constantly repeated by their father's old followers—that his defeat had been effected, not by the superior power of his enemy, but by the unheard-of treachery of his relative and ally; so that there always existed a by no means visionary danger that the wild tribesmen might some fine night be again seen, as in the olden time, bursting through the jungle, and carrying fire and havoc amongst the wealthy towns and prosperous villages of the alluvial plain.

Mr. Steel was a just man, but he was also a very earnest one; and he could not long deal with the relations of any two opposing factions under his charge without having his feelings deeply interested. When he had first come as Commissioner to Béshuckabad he had been predisposed in favour of Kumbukt Khan. He sympathised with his resolute obstinacy under defeat, pitied his fallen condition, and lastly (but probably by no means least), he assumed that the men of inferior perspicacity and force of character, who had preceded him in the office, had been influenced by the subtle flatteries and plausible pretensions of the veteran humbug, Lomri Khan, and he was resolved to show that *he* was far above the reach of such seductions. But the apathetic obstructiveness of Kumbukt Khan—the stately politeness with which he listened to and promised to abide by the excellent advice which the Commissioner so generously bestowed upon him, coupled with the calm way in which he practically ignored it—and the audacious lawlessness of his tribesmen, which the chief rather encouraged than attempted to check, all utterly disgusted Mr. Steel's active, earnest, well-regulated mind.

But Mr. Steel did not like reversing an opinion which he had once formed, and he might have stuck to Kumbukt Khan (as, indeed, he had been known to stick to other *protégés* no whit more worthy) through evil report as well as good. But an event occurred—an event which Kumbukt Khan, blind mortal! no doubt hailed with joy as the best service which Fate could do for him, but which, in fact, was to lead to the consummation of his ruin. His arch-enemy, Lomri Khan, was gathered to his fathers, whoever they may have been. This at once gave Mr. Steel a motive and an opportunity of changing his aspect towards the Zoolumkote *versus* Gurhi Moofsid feud. He could now throw over the pig-headed and impracticable Kumbukt Khan, without giving the irreverent occasion to mock and chuckle to each other that even the unbending Mr. Steel was not proof against the insidious arts of Lomri Khan. Besides, what a matchless opportunity was here for fashioning an excellent instrument for the future regeneration of society in Diknugger! The defunct Nawab's heir was of tender age. The son of such a man could not but be endowed with natural abilities, which only needed careful training. And on the other hand, the same diligence in conducting his education might reasonably be trusted to eliminate from the boy's moral nature those qualities which had distinguished his father, and the transmission of which was not so desirable a heritage. He was a ward of the Government; and the Commissioner would have absolute control not only of his estate, but also over his person during his long minority.

Mr. Steel was not the man to let such an opportunity slip. He threw all his great abilities and energy into the tasks of nursing the young Nawab's property, and bringing up the boy himself in the way he should go. He very soon came to identify himself with the interests of his ward, and, as a necessary consequence, was not long in taking up the Zoolumkote point of view of Kumbukt Khan and his works.

Of the youthful Nawab personally the Commissioner set himself diligently to fashion an Oriental Crichton—to make him a walking and talking epitome of Lord Chesterfield's Letters. For this purpose he spared neither trouble nor expense. An Oxford graduate of high character and attainments was especially selected to be the boy's private tutor, and it was impressed upon this gentleman that he must consider it his duty not only to instruct his pupil in all the wisdom of the ancients and moderns, but also to train him in every kind of manly exercise and sport. On closing the school-books for the day, this grave and learned person was by no means to consider himself at liberty to retire to the indolent luxuries of a cigar and a novel in his own private apartments in the castle. Certainly not. He was to hie him to the great courtyard, there to play at football and hockey with his charge, and half a dozen other young gentlemen whom the Commissioner's thoughtful prudence had appointed to reside at Zoolumkote for the express purpose of affording the Nawab the stimulus of emulation both in his studies and his games. And in the latter, it was a particular charge laid upon the tutor that he should take care that no undue tenderness should be shown by the other boys to the young Nawab's shins. The tutor was also expected to make his pupil a good shot, to teach him to "ride straight" across country, to handle a billiard-cue with skill, to speak the truth, to be courteous to his inferiors and respectful to his elders, to be chivalrous and honourable, and to take a caning from his master when he deserved it, or a pummelling from his companions at all times, as a plucky boy should.

The Nawab was now of age—eighteen years. The tutor, with a very comfortable pocketful of rupees, had left the glaring sands and hot winds of Zoolumkote, and returned to the academic shades of his Alma Mater, or gone on to settle in Van Diemen's Land, or otherwise disposed of himself. And the Commissioner was now to enjoy the fruition of his labours in seeing his quondam ward display in the eyes of an admiring world the excellent virtues and accomplishments in which, so to speak, he had been saturated for the past eight years.

It was essential to the accomplishment of Mr. Steel's various designs for the healing of the diseases and the development of the latent energies of the body politic of Diknugger, that he should have as his deputy in that district a man upon whom he could completely rely. And some years ago he had discovered such a person in Captain Greene Baytree. This officer was not generally popular; and an envious and slander-loving world had many ill-natured stories about him. One was that he was the son of a cigar shopkeeper, and had been presented with his cadetship in the Honourable East India Company's Service in exchange for a receipt in full of an unpaid bill for cavitas and regalias. As a regimental officer his talents had for many years been quite thrown away. Discipline, pipeclay, and the unwritten code of the mess-room were all equally obnoxious to his vigorous and original mind. He was abhorred and bullied by his colonel, abhorred and teased by his brother officers. In order to put an end to such an unsatisfactory state of things, and with the laudable desire of giving the public the benefit of his services in a sphere more adapted to his abilities, he took leave to Simla, and applied, with a certain modest assurance which was one of his most prominent characteristics, to a certain exalted dignitary for either a staff or a civil appointment. Courtesy is not a flower which invariably flourishes on very high altitudes; and the exalted dignitary, I am sorry to say, replied to Lieutenant Baytree's reasonable request with a vigour and emphasis of utterance to which the resources of the printer would be quite unequal to doing justice, and in phraseology which any decent-minded compositor would assuredly refuse to put into type. Baytree retired discomfited, but not dismayed; and being one of those conscientious persons who never willingly leave an injury unrequited, he sought an opportunity to discharge his debt to the exalted dignitary.

In the views of the dignitary, old age, while it had whitened his beard and rendered his nether limbs extremely rickety, had not dried up the impetuous currents of youthful ardour. And he was wont to seek in the society of lovely woman that relaxation and refreshment from the oppression of public cares for which we know, on the unexceptionable authority of Captain Macheath, it is a more effectual specific than even the notes of a fiddle. One night he gave a ball, and as all Simla was invited, Lieutenant Baytree was not excluded from his saloons. The host, with the exquisite politeness which distinguished him, left his guests in general to amuse themselves unrestrained by the awe of his presence, and retired to a snug private apartment, where a modest little supper was laid out. In the public rooms the revel was fast and furious, the music excellent, the champagne more than excellent, and few of the guests either missed the presence of the provider of these good things, or had observed his unobtrusive retirement. But the keen eye of vengeance marked all his movements.

The small hours were waxing less small, when Baytree went up to a great, strapping, sullen-browed young man, dressed in a cavalry uniform, who had just risen from one of the whist-tables in the card-room.

"Your wife wants you," he said, touching this person on the shoulder.

"My wife?" replied the young officer. "What on earth do you mean?"

"She asked me to send you to her," said Baytree. "She is in that room, where you can just see the light shining through the crimson curtains at the end of that verandah."

"Why, my wife went home an hour ago!" was the surprised rejoinder.

"O, then I suppose I have made a mistake. A lady came to the door as I was standing in the verandah getting a breath of fresh air, and asked me to send her husband to her. I thought she was your wife, but I suppose I was wrong. She was dressed in black lace, and had a wreath of blue and white flowers."

The tall young officer waited to hear no more, but strode towards the door indicated. Baytree quietly followed. As they passed along the verandah, a youth, an aide-de-camp or private secretary, or something of that sort, was smoking a cigarette just outside. He attempted to interpose between them and the door, saying that the room was private; but the officer pushed roughly past him, and drawing the curtain aside, unceremoniously entered. Baytree and the aide-de-camp rushed in after him, the one in a transport of alarm, the other of gratification. There sat the exalted dignitary, and there, sure enough, also sat the lady with the blue and white flowers in her hair, who was indeed none other than the wife whom the sullen-browed hussar fondly supposed to be sound asleep in her bed at home.

The action of the piece from this point was rapid. A shriek, a curse, a blow, the crash of splitting wood and shattered glass, and the venerable dignitary, no longer by any means "exalted," lay sprawling on his back, his head and shoulders through a glass door which had happened to be just behind him, and blood streaming from his cut forehead and hands, and dimming the splendour of the gold lace which covered his too susceptible breast.

What was to be done? There stood the big hussar with clenched fists, glowering over his fallen foe, with his kneeling wife clasping him tightly round the waist, and emitting shriek after shriek with embarrassing volubility. Already the sudden cessation of the music, succeeded by a confused hubbub of voices, told that the alarm had reached the ballroom. In another half-minute some two hundred people of both sexes would be crowding round the crimson-curtained door, peering over each other's heads at the interesting scene. Assuredly never was an aide-de-camp, private secretary, or other functionary of the sort in so dreadful a dilemma. The twinkling eyes of the artist who had composed this tableau drank deep of the cup of revenge.

But Baytree's nature was not malignant, and he now showed both generosity and presence of mind.

"Here," he said to the stupefied aide-de-camp, "put the guv'nor out of sight somewhere. Drag him right through the door—he's half-way already. The room beyond is dark: let him lie quiet there. Then when the people come, say it was me—drunken young sub. was rude to lady—husband knocked him down."

So saying, he seized a claret-jug which stood on the little supper-table, and pouring out a glassful of the wine, dashed it over his face and shirt-front; and then laid himself cautiously down in the uncomfortable position just vacated by the dignitary, whom the aide-de-camp, acting promptly on the inspired suggestion, had dragged with more haste than gentleness into the room beyond, and thrown down like a sack of rubbish in a dark corner. The jealous husband had just sufficient glimmering of reason to be conscious that Baytree's proposed explanation of the fracas would redound more to his domestic credit than the true version. So when the rush of curious guests arrived, and they were glibly informed, in answer to their eager inquiries, by the unblushing aide-de-camp, that the "little beast Baytree, who was more than half fuddled, had found Mrs. —— in this room waiting for her jampan, and had made himself offensive, as usual; that her husband, happening to come in at the moment to tell her that the jampan was ready, had lost his temper and knocked the beggar down —and served him deuced well right too;" when, I say, this plausible narrative was repeated, the injured husband had sense enough to hold his tongue, and lead his wife off through the crowd without vouchsafing a word of explanation or denial.

Within three months after this occurrence, Lieutenant Baytree received an offer of the civil appointment which he had before solicited in vain. Such at least was the account which was current in Mâ Bâp circles of the way in which he joined the ranks of the Commission of those provinces. I must confess that I have myself serious doubts regarding the strict accuracy of some of the details of this story. But as most people I have met who knew Green Baytree well appear to regard it as, at any rate, "well invented," I have set it down here, as throwing at least some reflected light on that worthy person's character.

The device by which he forced himself through the subordinate grade of assistant-commissioner was very simple. It was nothing more than exerting his innate powers of offensiveness and exasperation, always being at the same time careful not to commit himself to any particular act or word which his outraged superior officer could lay hold of to hang a specific complaint on. The result was, that every deputy-commissioner whom he was placed under in turn gave himself and the Government no rest or peace until the obnoxious assistant was passed on to some other. But this could not last for ever; and the time at length came when every district officer in the province had had a trial of him. Then the Lieutenant-Governor placed him under a certain deputy-commissioner for whom he (Sir Duncan MacTullub, to wit) had no great affection, and refused resolutely to move him again. That deputy-commissioner, in despair, took furlough, and went to England. Then Sir Duncan put him under another, who was of a meek and gentle disposition, and again turned an obdurately deaf ear to the most heartrending prayers for his transfer. The meek official then thought to try his predecessor's plan, and applied for leave. But it was refused. Then there remained only one escape; and that gentle deputy-commissioner died!

Then indeed were Sir Duncan MacTullub and Wiggins, his secretary, at their wits' end.

"I doubt Mountfidget is the only man we can send him to," said Sir Duncan.

"He would drive Mountfidget mad in a month," objected Wiggins. "His head has been rather queer, you know, ever since he had sunstroke."

"Eh, now; if you are cairtainly advised of that, Wiggins, it might be the best solution of our deeficulty. Eh, d'ye understand? If Mountfidget goes mad, he may murder Baytree, the poor lad, in a fit of insanity. Think of that!"

"Hum—m, no," answered the secretary, after consideration. "Mountfidget's tendency, when he is off his head, is unfortunately rather in the direction of suicide. And that would leave us just where we are, exactly as poor Mildmay's death has done."

"Then, Wiggins, I know of only one man we can put him under."

"Who is that?"

"Why, just himself. Ay," continued Sir Duncan meditatively, "Mildmay's death has left a vacancy among the deputy-commissioners. We must put Baytree into it. As he has slain, e'en let him take possession."

And so Baytree was promoted over the heads of some dozen seniors, and placed in charge of a district.

Mr. Steel happened to come across him in the course of some special duty in which he was employed, and was much struck by the quickness of his apprehension, and the firm grasp he was able to take of all the details of a complicated business. This was the sort of man he wanted as his deputy in Diknugger. He had hitherto had a difficulty in finding one to his satisfaction. The clever men, who could understand what he wanted to be done, were apt to have opinions of their own, which did not always coincide on all points with Mr. Steel's, and so they would not carry out his views heartily. The dull men were liable to run even more directly counter to his course, through stupidity. But here was one quick-witted enough to understand the slightest hint, cool and ready of resource in case of emergency, and yet who would (as the experienced Commissioner's knowledge of human nature assured him) be quite willing to sacrifice all independent views and opinions of his own, if only he was assured of obtaining in the long-run his *quid pro quo.*

"He knows," thought the Commissioner, "that I am pretty sure to succeed MacTullub in the lieutenant-governorship, and that a draft on my good opinion is safe to be paid in good current coin when it comes to maturity. He has the reputation of being a slippery fellow, but he will hardly attempt any pranks with *me.*"

Some may think that it was inconsistent with the character of Mr. Steel, whom I have described as a high-minded, scrupulous gentleman, to voluntarily have placed in a position of great responsibility under him a man who was singularly wanting in those characteristics. All I can say is that Mr. Steel was universally allowed to be all that I have said, but nevertheless it is no part of my business to vindicate every act of his which I have to chronicle. He was certainly not without foibles, which were capable of sometimes leading him very far astray, and not the least dangerous of these was a somewhat overweeningly high opinion of his own abilities. As for this particular case, no one would regard it as inconsistent with the character of a man reputed to be highly virtuous, who might entertain a complacent opinion of his own skill in horsemanship, to like riding a beast that was notoriously vicious. And a good deal of the same feeling which would lie at the bottom of the supposed case was present, I take it, in Mr. Steel's mind, when he induced the Government to appoint Captain Baytree under him to the deputy-commissionership of Diknugger.

CHAPTER X.

ADVENTURES BY THE WAY.

EARLY on Tuesday morning the Steels, accompanied by Ravensmore, started on their first march towards Diknugger. Not only were Mr. Small's two assistants, and the Superintendent of Police and *his* two assistants, and the Civil Surgeon, and the Executive Engineer—in fact, the whole male population of "Civil Lines"—at the door to see them off, but half the young fellows in cantonments had expressed their intention to one or other of the girls to ride out to the first halting-place, and so see the last of them. Grace Hawthorn and Mrs. Steel, I have no doubt, both speculated, each in her own mind, as to whether Rattley Trapton would have the audacity to form one amongst this escort, and if so, how far Bella's hardihood of disobedience might induce her to go. If Bella's father was troubled by any similar doubts, he did not let them take the form of idle speculation. He evidently thought the safest plan was, without saying a word to anybody, to place his daughter right away above temptation. So when the whole cavalcade was assembled in front of the portico, and the girls came out dressed in their riding-habits ready to start, instead of their riding-horses being brought round, the Commissioner's four-in-hand drag was led up to the door.

The Commissioner at the same moment made his appearance, smiling blandly, and taking no notice whatever of the disappointment depicted on the countenances of the baffled band of horsemen. He climbed dapperly to the high box-seat, and picking up the reins in his right hand, held the left out to his daughter, whom he called to sit beside him. Mrs. Steel, dutifully attended by the other two young members of the party, took a less dizzy seat in the well of the carriage, which was of the wagon sort. The syces let go the leaders' heads, and the four grays stepped gaily out, tossing their heads, and snorting in the keen morning air. Mr. Steel waved a general farewell; Grace beamed on the assembled crowd a catholic smile; Mrs. Steel vouchsafed a stately bow; Bella looked straight between the near leader's ears, as if supremely unconscious of the fact that half a dozen hats were being taken off to her on each side; Ravensmore, with his hand instinctively seeking his coat-pocket, asked Mrs. Steel if he might smoke; and then the *cortége* swung round a bend in the avenue, and left the assembled horsemen looking a little blank into each other's faces.

The travellers reached their encamping ground after a pleasant drive of eight or nine miles—pleasant in spite of an envelope of dust which made them as invisible to the passers-by as Æneas in the cloud in which Venus wrapped him; in spite also of trenches and pitfalls—it were an abuse of respectable terms to call them ruts and holes—in the road, which every now and then gave the occupants of the carriage a sensation as of being played at cup and ball with. They all had splendid appetites when they met again in the breakfast-tent after their "tubs," and the whole party seemed to feel the exhilaration which the first day of the fresh air and freedom of camp life always tends to produce—the whole party, without even one exception; for though the change had not cured Bella's now chronic ill-temper, it at any rate converted it from sulky moroseness to the less irritating form of lively snappishness. Mrs. Steel, though not adapted by nature or habit to take delight in mere roughing, was quite rollickingly good-humoured, and actually made light and joked about the feathers of her Paris bonnet, which the dust had utterly spoiled. As for Grace Hawthorn, all the pensive preoccupation which the varied events of Sunday afternoon had, it is scarcely necessary to say, produced in her behaviour the following day, was completely dissipated, and she was almost excitedly joyous. But whether in her case this was *solely* to be attributed to change of scene, and whether an equally magic effect would have been observable had they been marching, let us say, in the direction of Kooch Purwarneepore, of which district the assistant police-officer was flabby-cheeked and blear-eyed, I leave the reader who has heard Mrs. Steel's hints about Mr. Shafto, and who thus knows as much about the matter as I do, to decide for himself.

Ravensmore, too, seemed—so at least Mrs. Steel fondly thought—to be more complacent in the quarter in which complacency had been looked for at his hand, but had hitherto been baulked. And this perhaps helped to reconcile the worthy matron to her soiled feather, as well as to the company of certain entomological visitors who kept dropping from the top of the tent, and taking their places unbidden at the breakfast-table.

It may perhaps seem strange that the wife of an official of such high standing as Mr. Steel should display so much anxiety to win a particular junior member of the Civil Service for her only daughter. But the fact is that Charles Ravensmore, though *in* the service, was not *of* it. He was a gorgeous butterfly, accidentally passing his grub stage of existence in a wasp's nest, a fairy prince doomed for a space to toil in the unworthy disguise of a common drudge.

He was the nephew of a peer of great political influence, and I think (though of this I am not certain) was expected to inherit some property. At all events, his connections were such as to afford him an opening to a promising career in the arena of political life at home; and as he early showed in many respects a marked aptitude for success in this field, as he seemed to derive absolute enjoyment from severe and steady application to the driest of subjects, and had made a distinguished figure at Cambridge, it would obviously have been a wanton waste of opportunities to have banished himself to the obscurity of Indian officialdom. It was well known—at least to those who knew anything at all about him, and Mrs. Steel was one of these—that in entering for the Indian Civil Service competition, he had no such intention. He was induced in the first instance, perhaps, to go up for the examination by a mere desire to show what he could do; and as he headed the list of successful competitors, he had showed that he could do a good deal. His resolve to carry the experiment further, and actually take up the appointment he had won, was very likely an afterthought. He was gifted with a sobriety of judgment—in all matters, that is, saving his most injudicious and intemperate partiality for that maid of low degree, Grace Hawthorn, which, I suppose, was the exception that proved the rule—and he wished to acquire, while yet he could spare time for the purpose, a practical acquaintance with the working of the machinery of administration which he aspired hereafter to direct, and he not unreasonably thought that he could obtain this, with other knowledge which was likely to be of service to him in a higher sphere, as well, if not better, in India as in England. He had therefore come to India, and for some three years had toiled and drudged at the dull routine of an assistant revenue collector's and an under-secretary's work, harder than any ninth son of a country clergyman, or ambitious shoemaker's heir, who had no other fame or fortune to look for but what he could acquire in the service he had gained admission into.

But of course Ravensmore did not intend to pursue this self-imposed disciplinary task much longer. In another year or so he would throw up his appointment, enter Parliament, and doubtless be a Cabinet Minister before the luckiest of his Indian contemporaries had won his way to a district magistracy. And how much better—and more in accordance with the established precedents of all known fairy princes—that ere he threw aside his lowly weeds, and blazed forth in all the resplendence of his true character, he should be provided with the destined beauty, without which the magnificence of his transformation scene would be imperfect, instead of having to waste time so precious to the commonweal in looking for her afterwards!

On the third morning of their tour they had a short but trying march to make, as there was the river to cross. This was the driest season of the year, and the mere stream of water which intervened between them and the Diknugger shore was a brooklet—compared, at least, with the vast flood, nearly two miles wide, which during the summer months used to sweep down from the distant Himalayas. But while the waters of the river shrank, its bed remained a constant quantity, and two miles of fetlock-deep sand, which had to be traversed on horseback or carriage, was a less awe-inspiring, certainly, but even more patience-trying, obstacle than the same breadth of rushing water which one could cross at ease in a flat-bottomed ferry-boat. The whole party rode, except Mrs. Steel, whose figure had ceased to be one adapted to set off a riding-habit to advantage, and who therefore preferred vehicular transport, however slow and laborious. As her carriage-wheels sometimes sank nearly up to the nave in the fine sand, it took her about two hours to reach the margin of the little stream which still meandered in a devious, uncertain, lost-its-way sort of manner under the Diknugger bank.

Then getting the horses over this was a long, though more exciting, operation. Grace's, a fidgety little Arab, had a most Horatian distrust of the shipbuilder's art, and neither threats nor coaxings could prevail upon him to step on the hollow-sounding planks of the ferry-boat. At length Grace, tired of stroking his slender nose, and whispering soft words of gentle encouragement into his sharp, forward-pointed little ears, asked Ravensmore, who was standing by, vainly tugging at the reins, to put her up. He obeyed mechanically, having no idea of what she intended to do. She turned the Arab round, who, glad to lose sight of the "perfidious bark," bounded joyously away; but, before he knew what he was about, she had swept him round again, and instinctively obeying the touch of her heel, and the quick encouraging "Come, Daisy!" spoken in the familiar voice, he sprang forward, and to his own utter astonishment found himself safe in the boat. The feat was accomplished amidst a simultaneous cry of horror and expostulation from all the bystanders; and as soon as it was seen that the horse had dropped safely on his legs instead of rolling over her on the slippery planks, or going headlong into the river on the other side of the boat, as had seemed to be much the more probable conclusion of the reckless proceeding, Mr. Steel administered a solemn rebuke, while his wife requested the girl to remember that she was *at present* occupying the position of a lady, and should not indulge in the tricks of a circus-rider. Grace, laughing lightly, but through blushes which showed that she was rather ashamed of what she had done, patted Daisy's neck, and then slipped hastily down from the saddle. But the boldness and grace with which the whole thing had been done were very bewitching, and from that moment may probably be dated the decisive surrender of Charles Ravensmore's heart.

This was not destined to be the only feat of horsemanship performed on that eventful morning. When they landed on the Diknugger side, Daisy's exuberance of delight at having got over his perilous voyage seemed to excite him as much as his previous terror had done. And while Grace was dutifully employed in arranging the rugs around Mrs. Steel's knees, in Captain Baytree's barouche (which had been sent to meet her, for her own carriage could not easily be got across the ferry), the syce could hardly hold the animal. At last, when Mr. Steel and Bella cantered off, Daisy fairly broke away, and started off to expend the superfluity of his high spirits in a free scamper across the plain. Presently, however, bethinking himself that liberty afforded scope for other indulgences besides the unrestrained exercise of the limbs, he stopped in the middle of a field of young wheat, and commenced a vigorous attack on the unwonted dainty. Mr. Steel, and Ravensmore, and the mounted orderly who was in attendance, with the aid of a couple of the boatmen, seized the opportunity to make a combined movement and surround the runaway. But as they cautiously advanced from different sides towards him, he suddenly cocked up his head, then pricked up his ears, then set up a whinny, then whisked up his tail, and then—very nearly upsetting one of the boatmen—dashed through the narrowing circle and was off again, "over bank, bush, and scaur," at full gallop.

The Commissioner, not thinking that it consorted with his gravity to be caracoling about and hopping over bushes after a stray horse, now left the pursuit to Ravensmore and the sowar. The Arab evidently enjoyed the game, and instead of galloping right away, only took short bursts, and then stood still for the double purpose of eating a few mouthfuls of wheat and of luring his pursuers on. But just as they cautiously approached, and were on the point of making a sudden dash at the loose bridle, up again went his heels and tail, and in a moment Daisy was a hundred yards off. These manœuvres kept the chase within full sight of the girls, who were left standing on the road; and, indeed, it sometimes approached so near, that Ravensmore could hear the laughter and the ironical cries of encouragement with which they hailed his futile efforts.

After five or ten minutes of this kind of thing Ravensmore's patience, not unnaturally, began to wax faint, and giving up the idea of approaching the runaway by stealth, he set off after it at full speed for a fair stern chase, reckless at last whether the result should be his overtaking it some four or five miles off, or losing it altogether in the adjacent wilderness. But just at the moment when he resolved on this change of tactics another horseman appeared, approaching from the direction of Diknugger. When Ravensmore started for his final charge, this person happened to be about the same distance from the runaway horse as he was, and at once joined him in the chase. The Arab, which at that time had wandered to a considerable distance from the place where Mr. Steel and the girls were standing, headed back towards them; and a most exciting race ensued, in full view of them all.

The three competitors could not have been more fairly handicapped had the services of the late Admiral Rous been called in for the purpose. Daisy carried no weight at all except his saddle; but then he was a mere pony compared with the other two. Ravensmore rode considerably under twelve stone, and his horse was an excellent one; but active as it was, it had nothing like the stride of the huge Waler mare which the stranger bestrode. And then again, to compensate for this advantage, the stranger's own body was big and his legs long, fully in proportion to those of his steed.

But Ravensmore's horse had one great advantage over the other two: it was splendidly ridden, whereas one of its competitors was not ridden at all, and the other by no means scientifically. Still, the race was a very close one. The runaway, now mad with excitement, dashed straight ahead, swerving at nothing; and the two pursuers, evidently stimulated by rivalry, and the consciousness of the bright eyes which were watching them, strained every nerve to outstrip each other.

The ground was very broken, there being numerous deep clefts running in zigzags for some distance from the edge of the river-bed. This could not be seen from the road, and the two girls therefore enjoyed the sight of the race without being disturbed by any apprehensions of danger. But the Commissioner muttered uneasily, "I wish those wild boys would ride with a little more care; they will be into a nullah if they don't look out." And scarcely had he spoken, when the runaway horse suddenly vanished out of sight, as if the earth had opened its jaws and swallowed him —which, in fact, was exactly what it had done. A *nullah* or ravine—simply a huge crack in the level surface of the ground—screened from view at this particular point by a thicket of low bushes, happened to be in the way, and Daisy, dashing through these, had gone head over heels eight feet almost sheer down into the chasm before he even saw that there was one in front of him. Ravensmore and his rival were close behind, the former a few strides in advance. Bella and Grace were too much amazed at the unexpected disappearance of the Arab to have time for alarm, but Mr. Steel, with a hasty exclamation, "I thought so! Good Heavens! they must go down," at once sprang forward—not to the rescue, for that was hopeless, but to "pick up the pieces."

Ravensmore's peril was the more imminent. It was impossible to check his headlong career. His own horse was already dashing through the bushes on the verge of the *nullah*, when he saw the Arab plunge into it; but the rider's coolness and skill, and the horse's perfect mouth and extraordinary activity, stood them in good stead, and they just managed to swerve aside on the very edge of the rotten bank, the horse's feet sending huge clods of earth clattering down its side, before they were quite sure they had got clear.

The stranger being a length or two behind, it might have been hoped that he would have been able to pull up in time, but he evidently had not Ravensmore's readiness, and his horse was far less in hand. He first gave one vigorous tug at the reins, and that failing, seemed to urge his horse to increased speed in the utterly impossible attempt to leap the nullah. But the animal did not even attempt to leap; and plunging through the bushes, dived head foremost into the chasm, and rolled over on his rider at the bottom.

Grace, by this time comprehending what had happened, uttered a scream, and catching up the skirts of her habit, rushed after Mr. Steel, who was already half-way to the spot. Bella, who did not like the idea of seeing mangled bodies, cried out after her in terrified accents, "Grace, don't go. Stay with me. Gracey dear, O! don't leave me!" But as Miss Hawthorn paid no attention to her prayer—probably, indeed, in her excitement, did not hear it—she put her horse in motion and followed, having a vague horror of being left alone while such terrible things were occurring.

But before Mr. Steel could reach the edge of the nullah, or Ravensmore bring the headlong career of his horse to a standstill, three heads were seen to emerge from the bowels of the earth. The one in the middle was of light-brown colour, that to the right a ruddy chestnut, and that to the left of hoary gray. As the bodies appertaining to each gradually rose to view, they proved to be those of the stranger horseman, leading the Arab in one hand and his own Waler in the other, and all three exhibiting in their demeanour a most remarkable subsidence from the fiery excitement they had displayed sixty seconds before. Luckily the bottom of the ravine consisted of soft sand; and the stranger, after scrambling from under the inverted body of his steed, had discovered to his no small joy not only that both he and it were safe and sound in wind and limb, but also that in the very moment of their apparent catastrophe they had won the prize in the eager pursuit of which they had encountered it. In other words, the little Arab stood close by, too dazed by its tumble to make any further effort to escape; so, catching a horse's bridle in each hand, the successful jockey lost no time in reascending to the upper world.

Now, Ravensmore would undoubtedly have deeply deplored it, had he returned to the edge of the ravine, to see, as he had expected, his late rival's crushed and lifeless body lying at the bottom. Nevertheless, truth compels me to say that he did not see with unalloyed satisfaction the said rival reappear, as dusty as a miller and crowned with a very battered *sola topee*, but wearing in his sand-powdered countenance a beam of much complacency and satisfaction, and leading Miss Hawthorn's runaway horse. And there was a very perceptible ring of pique in the half-bantering, half-sneering tone in which, turning to meet Grace, he said,

"How shall I ever show my dishonoured face again, Miss Hawthorn, after my craven refusal to break my neck in catching your horse?"

"O, I am sure, Mr. Ravensmore, you do yourself an injustice," said Bella, answering for her friend. "If peril to life and limb were in question, I am sure you would freely risk both to do Grace the most trifling service. But in the present case, you see, the danger was getting a dusty coat and a broken hat, which, of course, you could not be expected to undergo merely to save her the trouble of walking the rest of the march."

Ravensmore did not deign to reply to this consolatory remark, but rode slowly back before the others towards the road, pouting like a spoilt child.

Meanwhile the successful competitor presented the recovered and crestfallen Daisy to his mistress.

"Here is your horse, Miss Hawthorn. But you will hardly thank me when you look at the saddle; the crutch is bent like a button-hook."

"O, never mind that. But are you sure that you are not hurt?"

"Not a bit. I am always very careful, on occasions of this sort, to drop on my head and pull my horse over me upside down, so that he can kick at large without my getting in his way."

"You are very considerate for the horse, I must say."

"Yes; a just man is merciful to his beast. How do you do, sir? I am afraid I cut rather a disreputable figure for doing escort duty. Perhaps the best thing I and my nag could do would be to take another header—into the water, this time. What do you think, Miss Steel?"

"You certainly *do* look as if you wanted the dust laid a little," replied Bella.

"Why, if you think of trying that plan," said Mr. Steel, laughing, "Miss Hawthorn is the person to give you a lead; she made a very pretty attempt at it herself not five minutes ago. But, for my own part, I should recommend the less heroic remedy of a clothes-brush. So, come along, Shafto; put Miss Hawthorn up, mount your own nag, and let us push on after Mrs. Steel and Ravensmore, who, I see, have gone on."

Grace managed, with Shafto's assistance, to settle herself somehow on the saddle, notwithstanding the contortion which the crutch had undergone. And as the volatile Daisy was now reduced to the most exemplary sedateness of demeanour, she had no great difficulty in sitting him, as they quietly cantered on to their encampment.

Their halting-place on this day was a pretty spot on the bank of the river, up the course of which they had marched for a few miles after crossing. There was a comfortable and picturesquely-situated cottage which Captain Baytree had built for the use of the European officials of the District—and especially of the No. 1 amongst them, whose interests he never neglected—when they had occasion to travel that way. The Steels did not make use of this rest-house, which, indeed, was far too small to accommodate so large a party, but their tents had been pitched in a fine mango grove hard by, and the girls enjoyed the rare pleasure in camp life of wandering about a prettily laid-out and trimly-kept flower-garden; for it might be said of Baytree, as of Goldsmith, that he touched nothing which he did not adorn. While the officers of other districts, when going about in the hot season, had nothing to shelter their throbbing heads from the fierce sun's "perpendicular rays" but little square brick boxes set up on glaring sandy plains, having an interior cubic measurement about equal to that of a cell in an English gaol, and an interior thermometric register about equal to that of an oven in an English kitchen, those of Diknugger everywhere luxuriated in cool and lofty apartments, protected by deep-bayed verandahs shaded by mighty trees, and looking out on refreshing greensward.

Mr. Steel used to shake his head whenever he came to one of these miniature paradises. And, indeed, as Diknugger was certainly far from being a rich district, the question necessarily obtruded itself, "wherever did the money come from?" Houses cannot be built without bricks, nor bricks laid without bricklayers. And green lawns cannot be maintained in soil of which the normal condition might vie with bricks themselves in colour and hardness, without water, nor water be drawn without drawers of water. But bricklayers and drawers of water must be paid, or at least *ought* to be so, and it was just that little distinction between the "*must*" and "*ought*" which disturbed the Commissioner's mind.

During the first years of his official acquaintance with Baytree, he had very grave suspicions on this subject. Numerous complaints had reached him in indirect ways, by anonymous petitions and otherwise, and he determined to go to the spot and investigate some of them. He not unnaturally selected as the scene of his inquiry the immediate neighbourhood of a great and costly work—a splendid ornamental tank—which the deputy-commissioner had just completed out of what would have seemed to a man of only ordinary resources absurdly inadequate public funds. He presumed that if there had been oppression, it would have been most severely felt by those living nearest to the site of the work, and who were most readily get-atable by the myrmidons of the Tahsildar. But this just proved that Mr. Steel, in spite of the knowledge of character on which he so complacently prided himself, had fallen far short of taking the measure of his subordinate's capacity. It was always

Baytree's strictest injunction to his Tahsildars never, under any consideration, to force labour within a radius of at least fifteen miles from the work on which the labourer was to be employed; so, when Mr. Steel rode about amongst the adjacent villages, asking everybody what they thought of the new tank, he heard not a single complaint. On the contrary, all were loud in praise of the beneficence of the good Hákim, who was their father and mother, the cherisher of the poor, a very Nowshírwán for justice, and so on.

It is true that one or two wretches came straggling up to his camp from villages at a distance, with long-winded, maundering complaints of oppression, which it was difficult to make head or tail of. But just while Mr. Steel was hesitating whether it would be worth while to go to these villages, a very distinct and definite charge of forcing unpaid labour was brought him from another village lying in the opposite direction. Here, at all events, seemed something tangible, and off he started at once. When he was yet several miles from the village he was met by a throng of women, making a tremendous hullabaloo, shrieking, tearing their hair, and beating their breats. After in vain trying to distinguish a single word in the shrill and deafening babel of tongues, he tried to push his way past and ride on to the village. The women then took off their upper garments—long scarves or sheets—and stretched them across the road, to constrain him to stand and listen to their cries. When these barriers had with difficulty been removed by his attendants, and a lane was formed for him through the midst of the yelling crowd, he was about to press his horse forward, when his progress was again checked by seeing a three-weeks-old baby deliberately laid by its mother within two feet of the animal's hoofs.

To make a long story short, however, he did somehow get to the village at last, and calling up the headmen, and the noisiest of the complainants, questioned them closely. He soon found that, notwithstanding all the noise, and weeping, and wailing, and passionate prayers that he would hang every man, woman, and child in the village rather than leave them any longer subject to the cruel yoke of their oppressors, there was a notable lack of definiteness of detail and of consistency of statement in the answers he received to his direct questions. And ere the deponents had been very long exposed to his astute cross-examination, finding themselves driven hopelessly into a corner, they were fain to confess that the whole proceeding was a sham. They had been bribed, they said, by a rich banker, who had formerly been the district treasurer, but whom Baytree some short time previously had turned out of his office on a charge of peculation. The said banker of course denied this with the most vehement protestations; but one of his servants confirmed the story by coming forward, and confessing, with much contrition, that he himself had been the agent employed to pay the bribes to the village headmen. This proof was irresistible. The Commissioner returned to Béshuckabad convinced that the numerous complaints against his Deputy at Diknugger were malicious slanders emanating from or instigated by persons whose dishonesty Baytree had exposed and punished, and marvelling more than ever at that officer's extraordinary skill in the administration of his finances. Summary and well-deserved punishment overtook the mendacious village headmen—punishment so exemplary that other village headmen and others throughout the district, hearing of it, probably communed with each other, that, if such was to be counted as one of the possible results of making complaints against Captain Baytree, it behoved them for the future to "rather bear the ills they had than fly to others which they knew not of."

The banker's contrite agent was also dismissed by his master. But moved, perhaps, by his genuine repentance, Captain Baytree some time afterwards gave him an appointment in the public service; not a prominent one, in which he might have fallen under the eye of the Commissioner, which would scarcely have been seemly, but a snug berth in an out-of-the-way part of the district, where he might have leisure to pursue his edifying course of penitence for his former misdoing.

Now, should any astute and cynical reader suppose it possible that Captain Baytree may have employed this agent to give a bribe, purporting to come from his master the banker, to induce the villagers to make the false complaints, with a view to throwing the Commissioner off the scent of other complaints which might, perhaps, on investigation, prove to be more genuine, I must emphatically tell that reader that he is wrong. I am perfectly sure that Baytree would never have done such a thing. But I think it possible that he may have said to his Tahsildar, "Here is the Commissioner coming to inquire into complaints he has heard about forced labour. *I* never authorised you to force labour. You know best whether you have done so. But mind, if the Commissioner should find that the complaints are true, don't look for any protection from *me*. I shall most certainly leave you to your fate;" and the most scrupulous officer who ever adorned the public service might have said as much to a subordinate.

Nevertheless, as I have said, Mr. Steel never visited one of Baytree's charming little rest-houses without an uncomfortable sense of that distinction between the words *must* and *ought*, used with reference to the hire of the labourer, rising unbidden to his mind. The girls, however, on the present occasion were troubled by no such misgivings, but sat in the cool verandah, looking out on the greensward and the flowers, and the shining river beyond, talking to the two young men with much satisfaction. Witches are supposed not to be able to cross a running stream, and it may have been that Bella had been able to shake off on the Béshuckabad bank of the river that morning the spell by which the wicked enchanter Trapton had bound her. Certainly she had got rid of a good deal of her sulkiness, and seemed disposed for a mild flirtation with Shafto. This was probably not quite the arrangement which Shafto himself would most have desired. And his eye and his attention kept wandering away to the other end of the verandah, where he could catch sight of a bit of Grace's skirt as she sat with Ravensmore just round the corner of the house. Why, after the service so gallantly rendered by him that morning, Grace preferred to the old lover, whom she had not seen for months, the company of the new one, whose persistent attentions she had never been able to get away from for half an hour together for the last week, I really do not know. It *may* have been only her good-nature. She saw, perhaps, that Ravensmore was much more hurt by his failure to tumble into the nullah than Shafto had been by tumbling in; and perhaps pity induced her to soothe the former. But Shafto assigned quite a different motive.

"That confounded young prig of a secretary," he said to himself bitterly, "who seems to be afraid of relaxing his smug features into the ghost of a smile, lest the Czar of Russia should hear of it from his spies, and take advantage of the momentary weakness to set Central Asia in a blaze, is not after all, I see, such an utterly unredeemable ass as I took him for. He has sense enough to distinguish between the real staple and shoddy, and dimly to perceive that Grace Hawthorn is better worth his cursedly conceited attentions, and quite as ready to accept them, as this girl who insists upon worrying me with her idiotic chatter. If the embryo Prime Minister has entered the field, I suppose it's time for a poor devil of a Bobby like me to hook it. Miss Hawthorn clearly thinks so."

"There is not the least use your thinking any more of Grace, Mr. Shafto," said Bella, stopping short in a story which she saw he was not listening to, and reading his thoughts with an accuracy which assuredly did not justify the charge of idiotcy which he so disparagingly laid against her. "Not the least bit in the world. If you had any idea of picking up the thread of last hot weather's pleasant days, get rid of it out of your mind at once. A seraph has come down among the daughters of men since then; and seeing Grace that she is fair, has taken her up into the seventh heaven. You might just as well now love some bright particular star, she is so completely beyond your reach."

"She was always that," said Shafto, who had no idea of allowing his jealousy to be the butt of Miss Steel's ridicule. "It would at any time have been sheer madness in me to think of Miss Hawthorn. Now, I might reasonably have aspired to *you*."

"Indeed! how very gratifying to me! But may I ask upon what particular difference between Grace and myself such a flattering distinction rests?'

"Simply," replied Shafto carelessly, "that I presume you will have lots of money, and your friend, I take it, will not. And as the wages which a niggardly Government allows me are barely enough to keep one body and soul together, they certainly would not suffice to do the like for *two* sets of the same, besides keeping a couple of hearts in a united condition into the bargain."

"A most prudent argument," said Bella. "Well, I am very glad for your own sake that you neither have fallen in love with Grace (though it was the cleverest make-believe I ever saw), nor propose doing so. But in that case, there can be no possible necessity for keeping your eyes glued to the frill of her dress all the time you are talking to me. Grace dear," she called out, "do pull in your skirt; there is a little bit sticking out round the corner, and it fidgets Mr. Shafto."

Miss Hawthorn obeyed, but not before she had fidgeted Mr. Shafto a great deal more by substituting for a single moment for the offending flounces a lovely and radiantly smiling face, while she begged his forgiveness for the annoyance she had been unwittingly causing him. However, it was clear that, unless he wished to open a window in his breast for Bella's sharp eyes to peer into, he had better pull himself together, and bestow some of his attention upon that young person, who by no means approved of being ignored.

"Are there any young ladies at Diknugger?" asked Bella.

"Two," was the reply. "Twins—daughters of my chief, Colonel Catcheside."

"It is a taking name. Is either of them pretty?"

"Both; Nellie particularly so."

"Then I am afraid your 'aspirations' may be more likely to extend towards her than even to me."

"Much; she is of a more suitable age."

"Is she? how old, pray?"

"She will just be marriageable about the same time that I am likely to be. Her present age is four."

"And how many married ladies are there in the station?"

"Two also, Mrs. Baytree and Mrs. Catcheside. Of the lower sex we are eight; to wit, my aforementioned chief, Colonel Catcheside, the district superintendent of police, a man of whom it is no disparagement to say that he is more cunning in horseflesh and the odds than in tracking burglars. Item, there is our head boss of all, Captain Baytree, the deputy-commissioner, of whom it is also no disparagement to say that he is cunning in most things. Item, Dr. Brandling, the civil surgeon, who may be cunning in surgery, whereof I am glad not to be in a position to declare, having so far kept off his operation-table, but is certainly cunning in nothing else, being the simplest-minded of men. Item, Mr. Bumpas, the assistant-commissioner, who is a master of all philosophy. And lastly, the three Masters Catcheside, who have all graduated with high honours in every branch of the arts of mischief, and are besides junior wranglers. There now, you have the whole Post Office Directory of Diknugger."

"What a delightful little social circle! What do you do with yourselves?"

"O, with ourselves we find various forms of amusement, smoking being the commonest, I think. And with each other we sometimes fight. A quarrel is the only thing that ever brings any two of us together. But luckily we are never short of the raw material for a row. Our supplies of beer and soda-water sometimes run out, and our ice never lasts over the first month of the hot weather. But we bottle up our half-used differences and put them away. And they are just like the widow's cruse of oil—when we pull the cork out again for another 'go,' we find the bottle as full, and the flavour as fresh, as ever."

"What a pleasant den of wild beasts we seem to be going to!" remarked Miss Steel.

"O, you will see us behaving with the most amiable sociability. The visitor to the happy family show is always charmed with the good fellowship displayed by the mouse and the cat and the pigeon in their combined performance of loading and firing off the cannon for his amusement. But, of course, they don't go on firing off cannons amongst themselves after the show is closed. Each coils himself up in his own corner, and only comes out for an occasional worry."

"I don't believe your description of your unsociableness a bit. I daresay you play tennis every evening, and whisper a good many soft nothings into the attentive ears of Mrs. Baytree and Mrs. Catcheside too."

"I won't take the trouble to contradict you. I will trust to the evidence of your own eyes when you see the ladies. But I do occasionally exchange a word which is not one of defiance or denunciation with the doctor. We live together in the *sarai*."

"In the sarai!"

"Yes. Diknugger very closely resembles Mayfair—in one particular. Nowhere else will you find the magnificence of the prince's palace so jumbled up with the squalor of the beggar's hovel. I'll be bound to say you might travel over the length and breadth of India, from Thibet to Cape Comorin, and from Jamrood to Rangoon, and not find a more charming and luxurious house than Baytree's. You will see the drawing-room and dining-room, at all events, for yourself to-morrow, when Mrs. B. gives us all a *saddly-peeroo Khánά**

---

* Being interpreted, a state banquet, at which, according to immemorial Anglo-Indian Mofussil custom, the *pièces de résistance* are a saddle of mutton and a turkey (*peeroo*).

in honour of you. The splendid columns of his lofty verandah bestride the narrow station like a Colossus. But we petty men, the rest of us, have had to peep about and find ourselves very inferior places of shelter. The Catchesides inhabit a ramshackle old thatched house so utterly out of repair that the whole family would be in daily jeopardy of their lives from the roof falling, but for the circumstances that the thatch has worn so thin, and the rafters are so honeycombed by dry rot and white ants, that they are too light to fall, and if they did, would not hurt the people underneath. Bumpas, as becomes a philosopher, kennels in a box about the size of a hogshead. There used once to be a companion structure intended for the other dog, the assistant policeman; but for some years that honourable office was left without an incumbent, and when I came to the station I found that the barrel which ought to have been mine had had the end knocked out; in other words, the roof had fallen in. So dear old Brandling, who occupied the two little closets built at the corner of the sarai, which were originally intended for the accommodation of European vagrants (had any such been so exceedingly ill-advised as to visit a land so naked as Diknugger), gave up one of them to me. If Brandling ever happened to possess the only available pair of shoes, or stockings, or—well, let us say coat—he would unhesitatingly give up one side of it to anybody who happened to be unprovided."

"And do you and he both live in the two rooms? How snug! What do you call the rooms respectively? I should think the hall and the dormitory, or dormitory and refectory, would be at once terse and comprehensive."

"You mistake; we are not chums, only next-door neighbours. Each has his own room, and the door between is locked, and a chest of drawers placed against it on each side, to provide against accidents."

"Well, you certainly do seem to be a most consistently misanthropical set of wretches at Diknugger! But in spite of all you have said, I warn you I shall keep my eye upon you and Mrs. Catcheside to-morrow evening; I have heard a very different account of her from yours, I can tell you. I suppose, if the Baytrees are going to give a dinner-party, she will be there."

"Yes, we shall all be there—except the doctor. Brandling never shows on such occasions."

"Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, I very much doubt whether Mrs. Baytree ever invites him. He is not a regular army surgeon, you know; not a commissioned officer. In substantive rank, I take it, he is only an apothecary,—a warrant officer. And Captain Baytree is not the man to tolerate the intrusion of so dubious a character within the aristocratic and refined circle of which he himself is so lustrous an ornament. But in the second place, if they did ask him, he certainly would not go. The flutter of a petticoat scares him, as the flap of a hawk's wing does a young partridge. He will cower close in his cover at the sarai as long as you ladies are ranging about the station, and only steal out at dead of night for a hurried trembling flight to his dispensary and his gaol."

"What fun to swoop down on him in his bush!" suggested Bella. "Do ask us to tiffin in your rooms,—your room, I mean,—and don't let him know we are coming."

"It would be no use," replied Shafto. "Nature has endowed him with an infallible instinct, which warns him of the approach of danger, although there may be no visible signs. But for that he never could have survived in the struggle for existence. Some bird of prey would have clutched so defenceless a creature long ago, and married him. He was here with me last night. He had ridden out with me, having come to see a poor wretch in a village near here who had a dreadful accident, and whom he is treating. As we were smoking after dinner I discovered to my surprise, by some chance remark he let fall, that he had never heard a word about your coming to Diknugger, though everybody there has been talking of nothing else the last week, and Baytree has been laying on eye-wash all over the place with a vigour that might, one would have supposed, have attracted the attention of a slug. But dear old Brandling is so wrapt up in his own work and his own thoughts, that he had observed and heard nothing. Here was a grand opportunity, I thought, of stealing a march upon him, so I was careful to give him no hint, and took care that nobody else should, till I saw him safe off to bed. But lo! when I got up, I found that the old boy had sniffed the tainted—or rather (I beg pardon) *scented*—gale, had taken the wings of the morning, and flown away."

"And this creature is the only thing you ever talk to, you say. What delightful intellectual exercise, to discuss gallipots with an apothecary!"

"O, our apothecary has some things in his gallipots that are worth rummaging—

'Musty seeds,
Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses,'

like the one in *Romeo and Juliet.* He has knocked about the world, led a roving, and, I should say, a ne'er-do-well sort of life, and has seen many things worth talking about. There is still some scent in his roses; his packthread can be spun on occasion into very tolerable yarns; and his seeds sometimes germinate into moral reflections on life, quite as full in the ear, I daresay, as your Béshuckabad *padre* threshes out in his pulpit of a Sunday morning. He really is a rare good fellow, with more good sense and honesty than all the rest of us put together. Unsparing in his work amongst the sick, but with a deuce of a hot temper, and always at hammer and tongs with Baytree, who prefers spending the local funds in erecting Gothic clock towers and Greek façades to frittering them away on drugs and blankets for a lot of unsavoury paupers in the hospital."

"Ugh!" said Bella, in a tone which seemed to show that Captain Baytree would not be altogether without her sympathy in his controversy with the medical officer. "I must say I don't feel very much 'drawn out' towards your friend, notwithstanding the poetic fervour of your description. I shall not be desolated at missing his presence from the dinner-table to-morrow, and I must say I do pity Mrs. Baytree and Mrs. Catcheside in having to trust to a mountebank of this sort, if they or their children fall ill."

"As to that, I should say that his professional knowledge is not quite up to Sir William Jenner's, though, in zeal in his profession, I am sure he is equal, if not superior. But he is, I believe, a real pukka doctor, passed the College of Surgeons and all that. I take it that he was originally educated as a doctor, but either owing to want of success, or a 'truant disposition,' cut it and took to roving. He seems to have tried all sorts of things, and has been in every quarter of the globe. Amongst others, of course, he has enlisted in his time, and has seen some sharp service. I can never get out of him how he dropped into his present line of life, which, in his dull routine, must be a great contrast to his early habits. He is very close on that subject. But it is not unlikely that they may have discovered in some emergency, while he was in the ranks, that he had been brought up as a doctor, and promoted him to an apothecary. How he got into civil employ and came here I have no idea."

"Well, tell me about somebody a little more interesting now—the dulness and vulgarity of your hero has evidently been too much for you; for I must say that you have fallen from the first poetic enthusiasm for your oddly-chosen friend into most unequivocal prose, not to say prosing. What is Mr. Bumpas like? He, at any rate, I suppose, is not an *old* fogey. But, O dear, *what* a name! For a small collection you certainly have the choicest specimens in that way at Diknugger."

But here Grace appeared, looking, as the keenly observant Bella thought, slightly flurried, followed by Ravensmore, who wore in his countenance a curious mixture of meek woe and offended self-love, under a veil of somewhat awkwardly-assumed nonchalance. Shafto, with usual male obtuseness, failed to see through the veil, thin as it was; and only observed enough to torment himself withal, viz. a slight appearance of excitement in Grace, which proved that her long conversation with the young secretary had been occupied by something more interesting to her than mere every-day small-talk. But Bella read what had happened in a moment, and lifted her eyebrows with a slight but most intelligent expression of surprise, which set Miss Hawthorn blushing freely.

"Don't you think it is time for us to be going back to the tents?" said Grace. "Mrs. Steel will wonder what we are about."

"And with good reason too," answered Bella significantly. "Yes, let us go."

CHAPTER XI.

GRACE HAWTHORN FINDS A NEW ARISTOCRATIC ADMIRER.

THE *Kila* or castle of Zoolumkote, the residence of Mr. Steel's favourite ward, the young Nawab, was near this day's halting-place. The Nawab had of course been to pay his respects to his late guardian in the morning, and at tiffin Mr. Steel mentioned his intention to ride over to the Kila in the afternoon, and see how things were going on there. Bella, who was beginning to find camp life very dull, who saw no prospect of getting up a flirtation with Shafto, and was determined not to gratify her mother by attempting one with Ravensmore, proposed that the ladies should accompany him for something to do.

Zoolumkote stood out well on the level plain, and was both a conspicuous and picturesque object in the view, for seven or eight miles round. It had been built piecemeal and for varying purposes. The oldest parts still standing were not very ancient, probably not over two hundred and fifty years old, but the site had been occupied by a fortified structure of some kind from time immemorial. No doubt Alexander the Great (if he ever got as far as Diknugger, regarding which I acknowlebge my acquaintance with Arrian and Polybius is somewhat too slender to enable me to pronounce authoritatively) may have driven up to the door, with lovely Thaïs sitting beside him in a chariot, just as Mr. and Mrs. Steel were now doing in a barouche. But the archways which had admitted them, and the halls in which they may have caroused, had long ago become, like themselves, dust. On their ruins other walls had risen, and in their turn crumbled away, and been surmounted by others and others, so that the *débris* of successive buildings had gradually formed a huge tumulus, rising abruptly from the flat plain to a height of some forty or fifty feet. And upon and around this commanding position the present edifice stood.

The oldest parts were the remains of a hunting-lodge built by a member of the imperial house in comparatively peaceful times, during the palmy days of the Moghul sovereignty. This had been enlarged and fortified to serve as a residence for the governer of the *soubah*, at a later and less quiet period. Then the ancestors of Kumbukt Khan had occupied and still further extended and fortified it, having dug a deep ditch and thrown a massive earthen rampart all round the high battlemented and loopholed brick wall, which had previously formed its external defence. And finally, Lomri Khan, while providently maintaining the fortified character of the place, had added buildings better adapted both in space and form to modern and civilised notions of comfort, and the era of law and peace, which he himself had so materially assisted to bring in.

Seen at "airy distance," and lighted up by the rays of the rising or setting sun, the irregular outline of turreted roofs and gracefully fretted balconies, the varied hues of the walls, from sombre, weather-stained old brick to dazzling cement, covered with quaint and gaudy frescoes, the whole reared up on high, above the dark-green foliage of a belt of mango and peepul trees which surrounded it, made a very striking and pleasing picture. But it by no means improved on a nearer view. After skirting a vast pool of stagnant water—of which it is hard to say whether the slimy surface, smooth and green as a new billiard-table, or the cattle-trodden muddy margin was the more offensive to eye and nose—the visitors crossed the dry ditch by a causeway, passed over a rough breach in the earth rampart, and checked their carriage under the shadow of a huge beetle-browed gateway, flanked by great bulging bastions. Here they had to alight, as their further way towards the interior led up a steep and tortuous passage, roughly paved with small bricks stuck up on end, and vaulted over in some places. The Nawab's coachman was in the habit of driving up this at full speed; but Mr. Steel did not care to subject his own horses to the difficulty, or Mrs. Baytree's carriage to the danger, of such an ascent. The whole party, therefore, commenced it on foot, ushered with the most courtly politeness by the Nawab's Diwân or High Steward, clad in the snowy garments of spotless innocence, and wearing about the most villanous expression of cunning and hardness that ever adorned the countenance of mortal man. Behind them marched a guard of honour of six soldiers, armed with musket and bayonet, and dressed in the cast-off tunics and trousers of some British infantry regiment, commanded by a fierce warrior, carrying a drawn sword, whose head was surmounted by a dragoon's brass helmet, his breast all ablaze with the gold lace of a horse artilleryman's jacket, but his legs rather incongruously swathed in an old patched pair of drab drawers.

During their progress along this winding alley more than one of the visitors' senses were assailed in a way which, according to our squeamish Western notions, seemed rather out of keeping with the approach to the front door of the mansion of a gentleman of rank and wealth. And while they were in one particularly narrow pass, between a heap of deliciously fresh stable litter on one side, and an open draw-well flush with the floor of the passage on the other, they were attacked by something more formidable than even strong smells or unlovely sights. This was the buffalo, which, when first they beheld it, a little urchin, innocent of clothing as ever his forefather Adam had been, was vigorously striving to tug through the doorway of a most odoriferous cow-byre a few paces in front of them. This purpose the little imp might possibly have effected in due time, had not the Diwân and the escort united to raise one common howl of objurgation, which not only frightened the buffalo out of its bovine wits, but stimulated the child to more strenuous modes of compulsion. He took to belabouring it, about the eyes and nose, with a pole three times as long and twice as heavy as himself, and this procedure in turn quickly led to a sudden rupture of the tie which had hitherto united the big quadruped to the little biped. The latter thereupon fled blubbering into the cow-byre, and the former, with nose in air and eyes looking nowhere in particular, dashed lumbering and capering full tilt down the passage. There was no means of getting out of the way; and our friends keenly experienced at that moment the feelings with which a set of skittles may be supposed to view the approach of the ball thundering down the skittle-alley. The Commissioner, a just man and tenacious of purpose, whom neither a yelling mob of riotous ryots, nor the frown of an offended governer-general, could have shaken in his solid mind, was not going to get out of the way for a buffalo; and as he was in the front of the party, and in the very centre of the passage, there was every probability that the monster would pursue its mad career over his prostrate but exalted person. His daughter, who was next him, with noble devotion seemed resolved to share his fate, for she threw her arms round his waist, and held him so firmly, that even had it been possible for that *mens æqua in arduis* to admit a thought of flight, he would have found it impossible to put it into action. Mrs. Steel promptly backed against the wall, and appeared to make an attempt to flatten herself against it. The peculiar contour of her figure, however, not lending itself readily to this plan, she caught Grace Hawthorn firmly by both shoulders, and held her in front of herself, at the same time gasping out—for what with the steepness of the ascent and the agitation of the moment, she was somewhat short of breath—"I'm ashamed—of you, Grace—being frightened—of a *cow!*"

Grace meekly submitted.

"Now is your time," she exclaimed to Ravensmore, "to redeem the reproach of having shirked the nullah this morning. Here is an adventure worthy of Guy of Warwick!"

Ravensmore sprang forward to obey. But Shafto was not going to let him monopolise all the glory of the encounter, and did likewise at the same moment. Owing to excess of eagerness and scantiness of space, they cannoned violently against each other; and though both ordinarily good-humoured young fellows enough, who had taken many a shrewd push at football in excellent part, they must now, of all inappropriate occasions, turn to interchange a passing growl of "deuced awkward," "confoundedly clumsy." And before they could recover their proper front, the buffalo was between them. She gave Ravensmore the benefit of her right shoulder, and sent him stumbling ankle-deep into the stable litter, while with her left she spun Shafto round, and deposited him in the arms of the old Diwân, whom overthrowing, the pair rolled on the rough pavement locked in a fond embrace.

The buffalo then, whether checked by the Commissioner's calm and steady eye, or considering that she had done enough to assert her supremacy, turned aside, and, taking a clean leap over the draw-well, left the rest of the party unharmed. All laughed loudly at the adventure, now the danger was past; but the merriment of the two young men—one of whom was having his once glossy boots assiduously wiped by the captain of the escort, who had taken off one of his soldiers' turbans for the purpose, and the other slowly disentangling himself like a modern Laocoon from the sinuous limbs of the Diwân—was by no means unconstrained. As there is a prevalent opinion that the circumstance of having shared any great danger together has a tendency to establish something of good feeling even between foes, it is necessary for me to state explicitly that their common mishap on the present occasion aroused no such sentiment in the bosom of Charles Ravensmore and John Shafto. On the contrary, a vague, instinctive, Dr. Fellian sort of antipathy for the other, with which each had been inspired from the very moment that they first cast eyes on one another, now took from this little incident a fixed, definite, conscious form of hearty detestation.

Their further progress no longer obstructed, the visitors made their way to the inner court. The entrance to this was through a doorway so low that even Bella had to stoop, and so narrow that her mother had to turn sideways to pass through. This led into a dark, windowless room. There had apparently been an inchoate attempt to light it by means of a lamp consisting of an earthen saucer of oil with a bit of string dropped into it for a wick. But this, after burning just long enough to develop a fine black head and lay in an inexhaustible reserve of smoke, had gone out, and now, instead of shedding light, made up by emitting a most potent smell. Then, conducted by the voice of the Diwân,—for they could no longer discern his figure through the gloom,—they turned to the right into a second chamber darker than the first, and thence to the left into a third; each individual member of the party floundering in turn over a bar of wood considerately laid for the purpose across the last doorway, and so emerged again into the light of day within the interior courtyard.

Here they were received in state, first by a flock of geese, which seemed disposed, like those of the Roman Capitol, to dispute their entrance. But these having been caused to stand aside, not without much expostulatory hissing and gobbling, by the bayonets of two of the attendant retainers, the Commissioner and his party were next met by the lord of the castle himself, surrounded by a brilliant retinue.

To those who knew what years of anxious care had been devoted by our Commissioner and his able coadjutors to the task of fitting the young Nawab for his high and important position in society—of throwing him out worthy to figure as

> "The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,"

his personal appearance was, on the first superficial view, a little disappointing. Not that it was insignificant; far from it. He was barely an inch short of six feet—round the circumference; for to speak of a waist in his case would be a misapplication of terms. Why, Shafto's coat, though he was by no means a small man, would not have buttoned round one of the Nawab's thighs. This physical formation must have caused the gentleman who had been intrusted with the youth's education considerable difficulty in carrying out that portion of it which consisted in field sports and athletic exercises. For instance, the Nawab could not possibly have a seat on a horse of any other kind than that which Cleopatra's Needle has on its pedestal, which depends for its security solely on the immobility of sheer weight. And as for playing at football—well, there certainly was one part in the game which his pupil was well formed to take, viz. that of the ball.

I have not said anything yet about the features of the Nawab's face. In fact, the head formed such a very minute portion of the whole figure, that people were at first apt to overlook it. But though on a very reduced scale, it was as round and plump as the sphere to which it was attached so closely, that nature, in the Nawab's case, seemed to have dispensed with the common, but useless, interposition of a neck. The forehead was small and retiring, but the lips made up for this *mauvaise honte* on the part of that modest feature by being large and forward. He had a set of teeth which would have done credit to a hyena; and his eyes, too, would have been quite as much in place above a wild boar's snout as on either side of a human nose; they were small, sharp, greedy, ogrish.

But, as Barrow says, the fairest jewel may be locked away in a homely box. And according to Mr. Steel's account, recorded in the eloquent reports which he periodically submitted to Government, no pearl ever lay under Oman's blue water more bright in its shell than the young Nawab's spirit in him. However, I need not say anything about that just now. The young gentleman will have an opportunity of letting us see some flashes of that same spirit before we are done with him. In the mean time let us follow him, as, taking Mr. Steel's hand in his own flabby fin, he leads the way to his reception-hall.

In crossing the inner courtyard they had only to make two slight divergences from the straight line—one to avoid a rich green cesspool, the other to make way for the broken body of a superannuated palankeen. They then ascended a narrow, dark, winding staircase, which led them into a spacious room, divided down the centre by a row of fluted pillars supporting arabesque arches. In one part of this room a long array of chairs were placed ready, ranged in a mathematically accurate straight line. The two in the centre had shawls thrown over them, the rest were cushionless. On the former the Commissioner and the Nawab deposited themselves, while the remainder of the visitors took the others. For *place aux dames* was not the maxim of etiquette in this court; and even Mrs. Steel had to be content with a position inferior to her host. The old Diwân stood behind his master's chair, and behind that of the Commissioner a servant in splendid livery solemnly swung backwards and forwards a large fan covered with red and yellow silk, and attached to a long silver pole. If this last appendage to the ceremony was *de rigueur* in point of etiquette, it was also rigorous in another sense. For the weather was cool, and, now that the sun had gone down, the air rather chilly. And as quite a complicated system of draughts found entrance into the room through a dozen unglazed windows, the artificial jet of air thrown by the *punkah*, just on the bald spot on the crown of Mr. Steel's head, might conveniently have been dispensed with. But not the air alone took advantage of the open windows;

they were also the chosen rendezvous of some lively families of the fowls thereof, starlings and long-tailed green parrots, which kept up an incessant chatter from their ledges, occasionally diversifying their conversational amusement with incursions into the interior of the room, up and down which they chased each other with ear-piercing screams.

Here the party sat in solemn state, feeling—as Shafto in a whisper to Miss Steel graphically described the situation—like the Christy Minstrels during a solo. The performer was Mr. Steel, who, acting up to his high opinion of the Nawab's tastes and culture, did not waste the precious minutes in complimentary or merely ceremonial speeches, but regaled him and the rest of the company with an instructive discourse on the chemical properties and economic value of household and street sweepings, with special application to the singular advantages of the castle of Zoolumkote as a field for the production of this inestimable commercial commodity. The Nawab, who apparently rather resembled that parrot famed in our proverbial lore than those which frequented his own residence, did not say much in reply. His Diwân, however, at due intervals, expressed on his behalf the proper acknowledgments of the wisdom of the Commissioner's words in such phrases as "without doubt," "under your Honour's favour," and so on.

To a superficial observer the Nawab himself might have seemed to be engrossed in two occupations quite distinct from listening to Mr. Steel's edifying discourse. The first of these was that of scratching himself, an amusement for which most parts of his body appeared to afford him a suitable field, from the toes which terminated one fat leg which he had curled up under him on the seat of the chair, to the crown of his head, to gain access to which he from time to time tilted his bejewelled turban forward over one eye. His second occupation, which he contrived to carry on without a moment's intermission of the first—even when the spot to be reached by his fingers was that situated exactly hal-fway between his shoulder-blades, to circumvent which involved quite appalling contortions of so spherical a figure as the Nawab's—this second occupation consisted in staring with his unblinking little ogrish eyes right into Grace Hawthorn's face, leaning well forward in his chair for that purpose. This, after a time, put the object of his flattering attention a little out of countenance. Grace successively blushed, frowned, turned her face towards the furthest corner of the room, and finally pushed her chair impatiently back from the line. The Nawab was just preparing to defeat this ungracious movement by a corresponding one of his own chair, which would have enabled him to command a view of the object of his admiration behind the backs of the others, and with this intent had, with no little labour, and not without the assistance of both his hands, uncurled the leg which he had tucked up under him. But just then the Commissioner, whether observing what had occurred, or accidentally remembering that the twilight of an Indian winter evening is limited in duration, rose, and said he should like to walk round and see the progress of the Nawab's improvements.

In the course of their tour of inspection, Grace, who was inclined to be fanciful occasionally, called attention to the grimly sad aspect of one large pile of buildings. It was lofty, probably four or five stories high; but the dead, blank walls of dull brick were unrelieved by the smallest window or even loophole, except far away up, close under the roof, two or three apertures—ventilators rather than casements—by which light and air could hardly penetrate through close screens of fretwork.

"Whatever can be kept in that gloomy-looking warehouse?" asked Grace.

"Those are ladies' apartments, Miss Hawthorn," replied the young secretary, who was always full of ready information. "You are perhaps aware that, according to the etiquette of Oriental society, a degree of seclusion is insisted on in the families of persons of rank, which is unknown, and indeed would scarcely be tolerated, in the freer atmosphere of our more enlightened civilisation."

Bella made what schoolgirls call a "face" and governesses a "grimace," and Miss Hawthorn answered, with something like a shiver,

"You don't mean to say that any human creatures are so unfortunate as to be immured in such a place? Talk of 'freer atmosphere!' Why, not a breath of air, much less of freedom, can reach the poor wretches, I should think. This is a sort of lady's bower one might have expected to come across in Bluebeard's Castle, but I should scarcely have looked for it in that of Mr. Steel's *protégé*. Can't you imagine that dreadful little window, Bella, right away up in the sky, to be the very one sister Anne looked out of?"

"The system of seclusion," replied Ravensmore, "is unquestionably prejudicial to the enlargement of the minds of Indian ladies, and therefore reacts detrimentally on the intellectual development of the native races generally, especially those which a natural and justifiable pride in their long descent and honourable history, and a regard for venerable tradition, with which it is impossible not to sympathise, are most rigid in exacting a strict privacy on the part of their females. So far the system is most certainly to be deprecated. But," he added, with a smile of grave and gentle ridicule, "the horrors which your imagination suggests can find no place, I assure you, in connection with a mode of life and a place of abode which are, as a matter of fact, just about as prosaic and happy as those of any English lady in India."

"Not a bit of it, Miss Hawthorn," interposed Shafto. "Your own instinct has pointed you much nearer to the truth than Mr. Ravensmore's essay, which, perhaps, he will allow one whose daily work has given him glimpses under the surfaceof Indian life, such as could scarcely be obtained by peeping through the pigeon-holes of a secretarial office, to say, goes very wide of the mark. Behind the impenetrable screen of the blank walls of Indian zenanas deeds of unutterable darkness have been done that would make even Bluebeard's own azure bristles stand on end. Such deeds are being done at this day. Ugly whispers do still now and then ooze out, from which even an official dignitary, with an imagination fed on quarterly returns, may guess the contents of the seething cesspool of cruelty and iniquity which is pent up within."

"Well, whatever may be their relative truth," said Ravensmore, with a laugh, "I certainly cannot hope that my essay was half so entertaining as Mr. Shafto's romance."

"There is no romance about it at all. Why, how can you tell that some diabolical piece of cruelty and villany is not being enacted inside that building at this very moment, while we are staring at it? The walls would tell no tales; and as they are probably four feet thick at least, it would have to be a very piercing shriek to get through them."

"You are too modest, Mr. Shafto," answered Ravensmore. "I have a higher opinion of the efficiency of the force, of which you yourself are an ornament, than to credit, even on such unexceptionable authority as yours, that over-uxorious gentlemen can with impunity kill their wives and hang them up in cupboards under the very noses of our police. I speak generally. Of course I have no special knowledge of the particular circumstances of the Diknugger district, where a superiority to quarterly returns, and a genius for melodrama, may possibly be associated with other qualities distinguishing the police-officers of this district from the common herd."

"The police have nothing to do with it. If I were to force my way into the zenana of a cobbler, I should very promptly receive a polite letter, signed probably by Mr. Ravensmore, suggesting the propriety of my adopting a line of life in which zeal is required to be less freely diluted with discretion than in the Mâ Bâp Provinces police. A zenana, like this in front of us, is under our law an Alsatia, an inviolable sanctuary of crime, across whose threshold no profane policeman or magistrate may venture to step. It is a holy of holies, and its altar is consecrated to—well, to Moloch and Chemos!"

"To the gods who preside over sweetmeats and small-talk rather, if there be any such," said Ravensmore scornfully. "I really don't think there is any necessity, Miss Steel, for your harbouring the uncomfortable thought that your father's late ward keeps a private inferno on his premises, over the door of which Mr. Shafto would like to post up the famous recommendation, 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here!'"

"Hum," replied Bella, shrugging her shoulders. "It seems at any rate that the Nawab's wives have to abandon the hope of ever getting out again. And for my part, if I were one of them, I had rather be allowed to retain that particular hope and give up all others whatsoever—leave them at the door as you do your parasol at the door of the Academy Exhibition."

"Yes," chimed in Grace, "if Mr. Shafto's blood-curdling picture is too highly coloured, as Mr. Ravensmore says, I must say that his own comforting assurances have to my ear very much the same ring as the Abbot of Holy Isle's encouragement to Constance de Beverly—'Sinful sister, go in peace!'—when she was going to be built up in a niche in the wall. But at any rate, let us get away from the dismal building, for, to say the least, the contemplation of it is not exhilarating."

And so they passed on, Bella manifestly enjoying—and even the more demure Grace perhaps viewing with an internal smile—the mutual scorn depicted on the faces of the two young men, and the evident readiness of each to expose the absurdity of the first harmless remark which the other might be rash or careless enough to let fall.

The short twilight was not quite over when they got back to the camp; and Grace, slipping away from the rest, went to a prettily-situated little summer-house which she had observed during the day, half concealed in a cluster of foliage at the end of the rest house garden, and overlooking the river. The day had been an eventful one to her, and she wanted a few minutes' quiet to collect her thoughts.

She had indeed, as Bella had guessed, refused Ravensmore's offer of marriage that morning, and she had done so without hesitation. Nevertheless, the event had aroused considerations—misgivings—which had long been present in her mind, though she had hitherto unconsciously contrived to keep them dormant. She was by no means fancy free. She exceedingly liked—she would not in the present condition of things acknowledge that she loved—Shafto. But Shafto's pay was very small; his prospects were far from brilliant, and not altogether secure; and he was in debt. So during the last summer at the Hills, when they had, almost without suspecting it, drifted to the very edge—if indeed they were not fairly thrown on the reef—of a mutual declaration of love, he had to tell her, with much bitterness and shame and contrition, that marriage was for the present a blessing beyond his reach, and that he had deprived himself by his foolish extravagance of the right to make love to any girl. He had at the same time announced a doughty resolution to amend his ways, so that he might at some indefinite future period place himself in a happier position. But when that time might come, who could tell?

Meanwhile every day, almost every hour, as it passed, forced upon Grace more and more strongly the conviction (which Mr. Steel's assurances on the Sunday evening had done very little to shake) that it was impossible for her to remain much longer an inmate of her present home. Mrs. Steel's malignant feeling towards her seemed to deepen day by day. Bella, she thought, was evidently tired of her company. And even in Mr. Steel's behaviour towards her, in transient, quickly-suppressed looks, and in scarcely perceptible intonations of voice, the delicate sensitiveness which her peculiar situation necessarily endowed her with detected sure indications that he also felt her presence irksome, and that notwithstanding his never-failing kindness and occasional tenderness towards her, there was, in the feelings in which he regarded her, some chord, so to speak, out of tune; some jarring memory, or trick of fancy, or association of thoughts—she could not tell what, but *something* which strangely mingled a sense of repugnance with his feeling of affection. But if she left the Steels, what was to become of her? The only course she could think of was to return to her old duties at the school. But human nature—the nature of a girl of twenty-two, endowed with high animal spirits—could not contemplate the idea of leaving the glad precincts of the pleasant social life she had grown accustomed to, for the dull drudgery of a governess's duties, without casting "one longing, lingering look behind." And this she had the power to keep; nay, she might pluck a still richer cluster of the pleasant things of life, by merely closing her fingers on it. Nor was there anything in Ravensmore personally to deter her. She liked him, respected him, and was by no means insensible to the flattery involved in his openly-shown preference for her. Moreover, she could not doubt his being thoroughly in earnest. He was not a man either to amuse himself by a flirtation, or to be led away by vagrant fancies. He had fallen in love at first sight, but he had fallen over head and ears, and was not in the least likely to emerge.

All these thoughts were crowding and jostling one another in Grace's mind, and she felt she must have ten minutes' perfect solitude and quiet—not to think them out, but, if possible, to let them in some degree settle down. And somehow in her perturbation she instinctively had recourse to her treasured talisman, her mother's letter. She took it from her bosom, read it over again, and then sat in the little arbour, with it open, in her hands resting on her lap, while she gazed pensively across the river to the horizon, which was quickly growing dim under the gathering shades of evening.

She was aroused from her abstraction by a footstep close by. Her letter was far too sacred a relic to be seen by any other eye than her own, and she hurriedly replaced it in the envelope, and the envelope in her bosom. Shafto—for it was he who had approached—could not fail to see that she was flurried and taken by surprise, and this in turn gave an air of awkwardness to his intrusion which was embarrassing to both.

"I must apologise for following you here, Miss Hawthorn," he said. "Of course, I had no right to."

"Not at all," answered Grace, meaning just the reverse of the literal sense of her words. "I was—I was looking at the view, and I believe I was dreaming. I did not know any one was near till I heard your step quite close."

There was an awkward pause, neither seeming to know very clearly how to go on. Shafto, to cover his embarrassment, catching sight of a scrap of paper, folded like a letter, lying on the floor of the summer-house, stooped and picked it up.

"You have dropped this," he said, handing it to Grace.

"No; it is not mine," she answered. "I have got my letter here."

"Ah," said he, glancing at the writing on the paper, "it is the doctor's fist, I see. I suppose it is some memorandum of his that he must have dropped. I saw him sitting here last evening. Well, I will stick it there for the present, and if I remember, I'll take it back to him."

So saying, he placed the paper in a crevice, between the timbers behind the door-post of the summer-house.

This little incident had given him time to collect his thoughts, and he now plucked up heart to say the say which he had come to deliver. But it had most unluckily happened that when Grace, shortly before his appearance, tired with the resultless task of thinking out the perplexities of her situation, had turned to her mother's letter for relief, certain expressions in it had suddenly struck her in a new and startling light. There was something indeed running through the whole of that incoherent appeal which, on reflection, she found hard to reconcile with the account, meagre and unsatisfactory as it was, which Mr. Steel had given her of his relations with the writer. A vague and undefined, but not the less disturbing, suspicion rose in

Grace's mind, and so entirely preoccupied it at the moment of Shafto's inopportune visit, that, to say the truth, she scarcely heard a word he said to her, interesting as she must have found the subject, had she only listened.

"Am I to understand," said he, "from your manner towards me to-day, that all that passed at Simla is to be treated as an idle dream; to be forgotten—bah! to talk of forgetting is absurd—but to be put down at the bottom of my memory as a thing not to be unpacked again?"

He paused for a reply. But Grace, recalled by the cessation of his voice to the consciousness that he had been speaking to her, and possibly asking her a question, could only answer with a half-apologetic, half-interrogative, and altogether lame, "I beg your pardon."

"All I have to ask of you," resumed Shafto, nettled at what seemed an inclination to trifle with a subject which he, at least, thought serious, "is to speak plainly. Let me know what your wish is. You shall be implicitly obeyed."

"I—I have no wish," stammered Grace.

"Miss Hawthorn, this may be good fun to you," said Shafto, in high indignation, "but I will not be treated in this way. Or if you think it necessary to affect this flippancy to cover your change of mind, let me assure you there is no such necessity. Say but the word; say 'I have thought better of it;' say that things have altered, and chances have turned up that you could not dream of before, and I promise you I will leave you without a word of reproach. But I claim a right to a plain and a serious answer."

"Mr. Shafto," said Grace, in dire distress, "I did not quite hear. I—I really don't know what you are talking about."

"Enough!" cried Shafto. "I see I have been a dolt and a drivelling idiot to take as sterling coin words that, I have no doubt, were never intended to pass for other than what they really were—the gilt counters of a Simla love-making. But fool as I am, I am not such a fool as to stay to be laughed at for my folly, though I daresay that is thought the best part of the game. Good-night, Miss Hawthorn."

"Stay, Mr. Shafto," said Grace, rising and laying her hand on his arm as he was rushing indignantly from the summer-house. "Indeed, you wrong me very much. But something has just—that is, something, which I cannot explain, has happened to-day, and at present my mind is so upset that I can give my attention to nothing else. I scarcely seem to comprehend even now what you have been saying to me, or what I am answering. Do forgive me if I seem unkind; I really do not wish to be."

"I presume," replied Shafto, "that I can, without being a conjurer, guess what the occurrence you refer to is. Well, far be it from me to disturb your meditations under such circumstances. But what I had to say to you is very short and simple, and it is not likely that I shall have another opportunity to tell it. Last summer at Simla you were good-natured enough to show some interest in my very unsatisfactory and not over-creditable money affairs. So I thought you would be glad to hear that since then I have succeeded in clearing off all my debts, and that an uncle, who lately died, has left me a legacy amounting to about a couple of hundred a year. Something further there was also to say; but let that pass. It is no great fortune—would not warrant my chucking up the police and going into Parliament. Still, to a poor devil like me it is a windfall not to be despised."

"Indeed," said Grace, with animation, "I am heartily glad of your good fortune, but still more rejoiced to hear that you had cleared off your debts by your own exertions and self-denial before it befell you."

"Well, well. In return for your kindness, Miss Hawthorn, let me frankly congratulate you on all the good fortune which has befallen you too."

"Mr. Shafto, you are speaking in riddles. But again I say, do not think it unkind or rude in me that I have been so inattentive. And, O dear! how late it seems to have got, and I have not dressed for dinner yet, and Mr. Steel is always so vexed if we are late!"

And so the second person who had made up his mind to propose to Miss Hawthorn on that day got no more satisfactory answer than the first. It was certainly not one to be marked in the calendar with white by that young lady's devotees.

Shafto, in high disgust, made a not over-courteous excuse for declining Mrs. Steel's invitation to join them at dinner, and galloped back through the dark to his solitary den in the Diknugger sarai.

CHAPTER XII.

DIKNUGGER AND THE DIKNUGGERITES.

Next morning they reached the little station of Diknugger. Grace, anxious to avoid a ride side by side with Ravensmore, gladly concurred in a rather peremptory suggestion of Mrs. Steel that she should make the march in the carriage with her. Bella, resolved not to play into her mother's hand, thereupon said that she would go in carriage also. So the two gentlemen set off to ride alone.

A couple of miles or so from the station they were met in due form by Captain Baytree, attended by his assistant, Mr. Bumpas, and the superintendent of police, Colonel Catcheside, riding at the head of about a dozen of the principal native gentlemen of the town and neighbourhood. Baytree was very angry that Shafto was not also present to swell the triumph of his train, and told Colonel Catcheside that he was not fit for his post, as he had no control over his subordinates.

"The fact is," he added, regardless of the long ears of several English-speaking natives, who rode close behind them, "the fact is, you are afraid to order Shafto to do anything he does not like, lest he should refuse to do your work for you, and your own incompetence should be exposed."

"You are always talking about my incompetence, Baytree," was the Colonel's plaintive reply. "And I think it is not right—it is not right—it is not right. I am one of the oldest officers in the police, and I have received the thanks of the Inspector-General for the careful manner in which I laid the Governor-General's *dawk* on the occasion of his visit to—"

"O, d—n the Governor-General's *dawk!*[*] I don't believe there has been a single day, during the eighteen years that have passed since the Inspector-General wrote that most incautious letter, that you have not trotted out those confounded horses. I wish to goodness you would lay that *dawk* again, once for all—lay it *aside*."

"Well, but now, about Shafto—what *could* I do? When I told him he ought to come with us, he— I say, do you see that little mare Banker Singh is riding? What a shoulder, and what quarters! She should be able to gallop. Gad! she would walk away from everything in the 'Galloway Stakes' at the Béshuckabad Spring meeting. A little cheeseparing would bring her down to Galloway height—at least, near enough; old Tapes has known me these many years, and would wink at half an inch. I must get Banker Singh to lend me the mare."

And so the philippian Colonel drew back alongside of the owner of the coveted horse—which was to be made a Galloway "by courtesy"—and began to exercise his blandishments upon him, neither thinking nor caring again for the Deputy-Commissioner's opprobrious treatment.

Captain Baytree expected all the European officers of his district to accompany him on such occasions as the present, but he did not recognise the "uncovenanted" apothecary Brandling as coming under that category, but was in the habit of classing him rather with the half-caste clerks in his office. The civil surgeon was therefore not of the party.

Captain Baytree was a thickset man of perhaps a year or two short of forty. He had a bullet head, with light sandy hair, fat chops, and little sharp gray eyes, set far apart, and furnished with eyelids that seemed a size or two too large for them. These he had a habit of letting partially fall, like window-blinds pulled half-way down when the sun is too bright, whenever he was in the presence of persons of superior rank, from whom he hoped to derive any benefit. His mouth, thick-lipped but firm, with the corners habitually drawn in, and the chin slightly elevated, was expressive at once of self-conceit, sensuality, and ruthless determination—in other words, as Shafto once expressed it, "of the world, the flesh, and the devil."

---

[*] When Anglo-Indians speak of "laying a *dawk*," they mean placing out relays of horses for a journey.

Colonel Catcheside was light and spare, as became a gentleman jockey. It was generally supposed that each particular bone in his body had in one steeplechase or another been broken at least once, and one arm had been so frequently out of joint that it had got quite used to it, and the Colonel would sometimes slip it out and in again while sitting at table, for the entertainment of his friends. The lines of his countenance were *not* of the determined character which marked Captain Baytree's; nor was there a very great amount of intelligence in it—just about enough, one would have judged, to qualify for the feat of inducing a yearling "griff" to give instead of take the odds about a racehorse.

The third member of the triumvirate who headed the procession which advanced to meet the Commissioner, Mr. Bumpas, was a young man of diminutive stature but inordinately large head, which latter was crowned with a shock of curly and unkempt brown hair. His figure standing would be best described as resembling one's own when seen reflected on the bulging surface of a shining silver tea-pot, when the face seems to loom preternaturally broad and large, and the body and limbs dwindle away into nothing, like the roots of a radish. But at present he was seated on a wall-eyed, string-halting old pony, and, with his legs encased in most "knowing" gaiters, looked the ideal of a stable-boy; at least, so Colonel Catcheside, who must have been an authority on such a point, assured him.

Mr. Steel greeted them all — both black and white faces — with his usual stately urbanity, and introduced Mr. Ravensmore. Baytree dropped the window-blinds as he bowed before the dazzling young secretary, and wreathed his thick lips into their blandest smile as he addressed some flattering observation to him. Colonel Catcheside, after taking a rapid measure of the young man and his horse, confided to him in a confidential undertone that he had in his stable the very nag to suit him. He had no intention, he added, of parting with it, and in fact would not under ordinary circumstances do so for two thousand rupees. But to oblige a friend of Mr. Steel's, he would willingly let Ravensmore have an animal that was so evidently designed by nature especially to carry him. And they would not quarrel about the price—say six or eight hundred, as a matter of form.

The Diknuggerites had ridden out at a foot's pace; but Mr. Steel, a light weight, well mounted, and always eager to get to his reports and dockets, was accustomed "in going to devour the way" at a speed which by no means suited the appetite of Mr. Bumpas' destrier, nor indeed the equitational skill of its rider, who (as they say in India) had an excellent seat—in a buggy. So Captain Baytree's erudite and accomplished assistant very soon found himself left behind in sole enjoyment of a dense cloud of dust, on which, ere it cleared off and disappeared like a smoke wreath on the distant horizon, he had involuntarily made a very hearty breakfast.

He was still some way from the station when the carriage, with Mrs. Baytree and the girls in it, overtook him.

"Have you been left behind, Mr. Bumpas?" said Mrs. Steel, checking the carriage.

"I have *stayed* behind," answered the small man, in a voice so preternaturally deep, that it seemed to the hearers that it could only have come *through* him, and must have had its source in some far profounder depth than his lungs—perhaps in the chest of the wall-eyed pony.

"Mr. Bumpas has waited to escort us," gently suggested Grace.

"O, that was very polite," remarked Mrs. Steel graciously.

"But had we not better be going on, mamma?" said Bella, with a mischievous glance at the horseman's uneasy seat. "It is getting dreadfully late; and Mr. Bumpas will gallop by the side of the carriage."

"No," said Bumpas, "you are mistaken. I did not wait for you. Pray go on and don't mind me. I don't see the use of a district officer, who is endowed with intelligence and power of observation, tearing along the road like a demented post-boy. How can he either see the state of the country, or think of the best means of improving it? He might just as well stop at home."

"O, you see how it is, mamma. Mr. Bumpas kindly lagged behind for the purpose of teaching papa the proper way to do his work."

"I think you had better get into the carriage with us," said Mrs. Steel good-naturedly.

"O no, mamma. How will he be able to observe the condition of the country, whirling along in a cloud of dust at ten miles an hour?" said Bella.

"O, but if he comes along at his present rate," put in Grace, "he won't reach Diknugger till to-morrow morning; and how can he exercise his powers of observation in the dark?"

"Never mind the girls' quizzing, Mr. Bumpas, but get in," said Mrs. Steel. "I see you have your *syce* with you: let him bring on your pony."

And Mr. Bumpas, like a philosopher as he was, took the advice. But though the ladies were kept waiting for him, he would not descend from his "bad eminence" until the groom had securely buckled a leading rope on to the head-stall of the meek pony. Then, with a last solemn and minatory injunction to "mind and not let go," he cautiously dismounted.

"Riding is a relic of a barbarous age," he remarked sententiously, as he took his place by Grace's side on the front seat of the barouche.

They soon reached the station, which, it is needless to say, was a picture of neat beauty. The warm red colour of the roads, paved with broken bricks, contrasted with the green of the well-watered turf and the trim hedges on each side. The public buildings which they passed, the court-house, the dispensary, the police barracks, were not only in apple-pie order, and gleaming in the sunshine with all the dazzling glory of fresh whitewash, but their somewhat crude architectural character was softened by judiciously-trained creepers. Captain Baytree's own residence, a palatial mansion, as described by Shafto, stood in a miniature park, kept up to the very acme of order, through the glades and over the tops of the fine trees of which glimpses of the house could be seen. The other places of abode, which Shafto had sketched in less glowing language, were kept in the background, out of sight.

As they drove through the station to their encampment, which was in a grove of trees on the further side, a horseman—a European—passed them trotting briskly in the opposite direction. He was a striking, not to say a quaint, figure; and indeed, except for his horse, which was no Rosinante, but a good serviceable country-bred, he might have stood for a portrait of Don Quixote. He was a very tall, spare man—lean in the cheeks, thin in the flanks, but with wiry, muscular limbs—evidently to the most cursory and inexperienced glance "hard as nails." He sat his nag as erect as a Life Guardsman, and with the "grip" of a rough-rider. Though probably not originally a dark-complexioned man, his skin was tanned and weather-beaten to such a degree that it very much resembled the well-worn brown leather gaiters which he wore; so that, looking at his face, his large bony hands, and the portion of his leg below the knee, one might easily have thought at first sight that all those parts of his body were equally uncovered by clothing. His age was probably not much over five-and-forty, though the deep furrows which seamed his face, and the almost quite gray colour of his short clipped hair and long thin beard, might at the first glance have prompted one to set it down as more. His features were even more Quixote-like than his figure; too pronouncedly and harshly aquiline to be called handsome, but imbued with a nobility of expression which impelled you to say, as you looked at them, that if not actually handsome, they ought to have been so.

In grave courtesy of manner and reverent treatment of the fair sex he seemed in no whit to fall short of his chivalrous prototype. Although he was not acquainted with any of the three ladies, he drew up his horse to a walk as the carriage passed, and made a most polite bow.

"Gracious! What a scarecrow!" ejaculated (quite loud enough for the subject of the epithet to hear) Miss Steel, who, being seated by her mother on the back seat of the carriage, was the first to catch sight of him. "You don't happen to have a lunatic asylum amongst your public institutions here, do you, Mr. Bumpas? If so, I should say there has been an escape this morning."

"Scarecrow!" rejoined Grace, who, seated with her back to the horses, caught a later and less full view of the cavalier. "A most charmingly romantic figure, *I* think—an ideal Crusader!"

"His manners, at any rate, are most high bred," remarked Mrs. Steel, palpably gratified by the stranger's deferential salute. "Who is he, Mr. Bumpas?"

"He?" replied the guttural Bumpas loftily. "O, his name is Brandling. By a sort of legal, or rather administrative, fiction he is supposed to be our doctor. In knowledge of the progress and development of physiological, biological, pathological, and hygienic science, he is, I suppose, about abreast of Hippocrates; but, I daresay, his skill is quite sufficient for the treatment of the *dura ilia* of Captain Baytree, or that Orson, Shafto, or of the little Catchesides, whom I myself have seen devouring whole pumpkins raw, without the smallest apparent derangement of their digestive organs."

I am inclined to think that the next two days during which the party halted at Diknugger did not impress the two girls with a very favourable idea of life in a small civil station. There seemed to be nothing whatever to see or do until four in the afternoon, when a few deadly-lively sets of tennis were gone through in Captain Baytree's garden. But as neither Ravensmore nor Shafto thought fit to be present, the play may be said to have languished sadly. The truth was, that each of these two young Achilleses sulked in his tent through pique at the fancied preference shown by their common Briseis to the other. The consequence was, that there was no one to play with the girls but the two ladies of the station, Mrs. Baytree and Mrs. Catcheside; for various impediments prevented any of the other gentlemen from being performers. The obstacle in Bumpas' case was, of course, his intellectual superiority; in Catcheside's it was one of his numberless falls on the steeplechase course, which had resulted in making one leg shorter by a couple of inches or so than the other, and in imparting to his mode of locomotion, when on foot, a peculiar dot-and-go one action, unfavourable to display in the tennis-court. Baytree, indeed, was a good player, and so fond of the game that he used to make his wife, who hated it, stand opposite to him for an hour regularly every evening, to serve him with balls, and be volleyed at in return—the volleys being of a twofold description, and coming at the same time from the player's bat and his tongue, both equally hard hitters. But on the present occasion the Deputy-Commissioner was constrained to sit out and talk shop with Mr. Steel.

The two ladies of Diknugger were the reverse of successful either in tennis or conversation. Mrs. Baytree had some eight or ten years before, as Miss Kittlethorpe, been a pretty girl, and so frolicsome that prudish matrons were wont to turn up the whites of their eyes at her doings and sayings. But since then

> "Had canker Baytree ate her bud,
> And chased the native beauty from her cheek;
> And she did look as hollow as a ghost,
> And dim and meagre as an ague fit."

She moved about and spoke (when obliged to) with an air of weary apathy, quickened occasionally into a sort of dull life by an evident dread of her husband, at whom she kept for ever peeping out of the corners of her eyes in a furtive, terrified way.

Mrs. Catcheside was lively enough, but in a jerky and flighty way. She rushed and bounded and strode about the court with very much more activity than elegance, seldom failing to try and take her partner's balls, and generally getting back to her own court some five seconds later than the ball when it happened to light on it. She kept up an unremitting peal of laughter, which might have been heard at Béshuckabad, laughing at everything that was said, grave or gay; and when nothing was said, laughing at the silence. And yet a child could have seen that she was painfully ill at ease all the time, and her thoughts far from the game, and further still from her hilarity. What probably did engage her attention were such questions as whether Mrs. Steel thought her dress very old-fashioned; whether the stewards of the Béshuckabad races would fulfil their threat not to allow her husband's horses to run unless he paid up the bets he had lost at the last Sonepore meeting; whether young Butterton, to whom the Colonel had written a most melting appeal, referring with heartrending eloquence to the impending fate of their children turned out naked and roofless to perish in the bitter blast of a cruel world, would be induced to back another bill to enable him to comply with the stewards' condition; whether the said children were at that moment only tearing each other's hair out in handfuls, or struggling at the edge of the well for the possession of their father's full-dress tunic, which she remembered that she had incautiously left lying about, and which she felt certain they would seize the opportunity to wash; and lastly, whether baby was crying, and the ayah soothing him with a pill of opium.

"How thankful I am that is over!" ejaculated Grace, in an aside to Bella, when the deepening shades of evening put an end to the last set. "I don't know whether Mrs. Baytree's lackadaisicalness or the other's clatter is most irritating."

"They are a delightful pair," answered Bella. "Charming subjects of study; Il Penseroso and L'Allegro—'loathed melancholy' and 'vain deluding joys.'"

Time never hung heavily on Mr. Steel's hands. He spent some three or four hours walking through the narrowest and closest lanes and slums of the native town, and scenting out ill odours with a relish of genuine enjoyment. Then he inspected the courts, the record-rooms, the treasury, the dispensary, the gaol. In connection with this last there was a little incident which I may mention as illustrative of the characters of two of the Diknugger officials.

A few days before the Commissioner's visit, three prisoners, who had been engaged in work outside, and at a distance from the gaol, had escaped. Now, their having been allowed to go beyond the immediate precincts of the gaol was contrary to express rules laid down by the Government. Mr. Steel, on his arrival at Diknugger, expressed to Captain Baytree his high displeasure at this breach of the regulations, and demanded to know how the superintendent of the gaol, who was Dr. Brandling, had ventured to commit it.

"Well, sir," replied Baytree, "there is no use attempting to conceal that Mr. Brandling has an unfortunate, I may say perverse, tendency to impatience of authority. He is not easy to manage."

"Then," said the Commissioner, "let him quit Government service, and go his own course at leisure."

Baytree smiled sadly. "Poor fellow!" he said. "I believe he has an aged mother and several sisters dependent on him in Calcutta or somewhere."

"That is no justification of insubordination," said Mr. Steel. "A man is bound to obey the orders of the employer whose wages he takes, whether he expends those wages for his own gratification or for the support of others."

"But I think," urged Baytree, "that Brandling has now already had such a lesson as he will not forget. I have given him a sound rating, I assure you; and there can be no doubt he is greatly shocked and alarmed at the result of his defiance of orders. I don't think he will be guilty of similar misconduct again. His evident distress was really painful. And indeed I would venture to ask, as a *personal* favour to *myself*, Mr. Steel, that you would—unless you think the interests of the public service peremptorily require otherwise—that you would pass over this matter with him somewhat lightly."

"Well, if you put it in that way," said Mr. Steel, "I will not push the matter further."

But of course he could not be altogether silent on so grave a dereliction of duty, and when he inspected the gaol he spoke of it with severe displeasure.

"Mr. Brandling was wrong, inexcusably wrong," put in Baytree before the culprit had time to answer; "but it is right that I should mention that in this case there are some circumstances to be considered in extenuation, and I myself was perhaps in some degree—"

"There were no extenuating circumstances at all," interrupted the doctor quietly. "I was solely responsible for the breach of regulation which I permitted, and I am solely and wholly to blame."

"Well, as you see your fault in its proper light, and make no pretence at justifying it," said the Commissioner, "I will say no more about it. But take care such a thing never occurs again."

He spoke curtly, indeed harshly; for, to tell the truth, he was unable to discern in the calm reply of this uncovenanted apothecary any of that dire distress, of those penitent compunctions, arising from the thought of the venerated mother and beloved sisters reduced to starvation, or the cruel necessity of begging their bread in the streets of Calcutta or elsewhere, through his misconduct, which Baytree had hinted at. And this annoyed him. He thought he had been entrapped into undue leniency by false pretences, and (somewhat illogically and unjustly, it must be confessed) felt a dislike for the man for whose benefit the trick had been played.

But that the moral of this episode may be fully understood, it is necessary to state how the prisoners actually had come to be employed in a situation which afforded them the means which they took advantage of to escape. The fact was, that they were digging a trench in Captain Baytree's private garden, and for Captain Baytree's private advantage. Brandling had protested strongly against the practice, and at first had flatly refused to comply with the Deputy-Commissioner's requisition. But at last the latter had, partly by insistence, and partly by cajoling, induced him to yield to his superior authority. And the characteristic touch in the story is that neither Baytree nor Brandling thought it necessary to mention these circumstances to the Commissioner. From which the judicious reader may perhaps be inclined to infer that the resemblance of the uncovenanted apothecary to the Knight of La Mancha did not end with his appearance or even with his manners.

The ladies saw nothing more of Dr. Brandling during their stay in the station, after the passing glimpse they had had in the course of their drive in. He was not a ladies' man; and as Shafto had prophesied, he lay close in his room at the sarai, except at unearthly hours before the dawn, and during the meridian heat, when he thought he was not likely to meet them abroad, when he stole forth for needful exercise and work.

On the morning of the second day, Sunday, Baytree read the service in the little church with great unction. The building, though simple to severity, was not unpicturesque, nestling as it did in a nook of the station gardens, half surrounded by a thick screen of acacias, and with a stretch of greensward in front, across which a path, paved with brick and bordered by cypress-trees, led from the rustic gate to the porch, covered with creepers. Such at least was the normal appearance of the little edifice, in which condition its doors were never opened for a six-month together, except for an occasional sweeping out. But now that it was to be used, and used too under the distinguished patronage of the Commissioner of Béshuckabad and Mrs. Steel, Captain Baytree entertained much too great a reverence for its sacred character to leave it in its ordinary dingy state. So he had had the gate painted a bright green, and the walls of the church itself coloured outside a warm pink, and inside a delicate whitewash picked out with blue.

The congregation was large even to overflowing, so that considerable ingenuity had to be resorted to in the way of packing in the back seats, which were occupied by the Eurasian clerks of the Deputy-Commissioner's office and their families. And *such* families! None of your beggarly allowances of six or eight shafts to a quiver, but a good round average of twenty offshoots, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren all told, to each parent stem.

Now it is a melancholy truth, I fear, that there are some even amongst professional and duly-ordained clergymen who have so imperfectly scotched, instead of killed, the old Adam in themselves, as to feel a puff of vainglorious satisfaction at seeing before them a congregation overflowing from the seats to the aisles. But our amateur priest of Diknugger was very far from giving place to any such unprofitable feeling. After the service was concluded, while the rest of the congregation walked in groups slowly down the pathway, Captain Baytree beckoned to his head clerk, Mr. De Sylva, and his treasury clerk, Mr. De Rozario, and taking them out of sight and hearing behind a buttress, gave them the following private exhortation in addition to that which he had just been reading out of an excellent sermon-book for the common edification of the whole congregation:

"What the devil do you mean by intruding your greasy squaws and infernal black imps into the church, making the place smell like the dormitory of a workhouse? I saw that Mrs. Steel was almost suffocated, and Miss Steel kept her scent-bottle to her nose the whole time. Do you suppose Government built this church for *Christians* or for *officers?* Now, mark me, I don't mind you coming to church yourselves; in fact, you ought to come; it is only showing proper respect to *me.* But if ever you bring your d—d women and brats here again, I'll sack you both, as sure as my name is Greene Baytree."

Mr. De Sylva and Mr. De Rozario slunk away sadder, but it is to be hoped better, Christians. And the Deputy-Commissioner, tricking his beaming countenance anew with the benign expression befitting the holy day, walked quickly down the path and overtook the Commissioner.

"I am glad to see that you keep up the Sunday services, Captain Baytree," said Mr. Steel, "and that you have such a good congregation. It seems to me so important, particularly in small secluded stations like this, to afford the Eurasian clerks, and more especially their families, all the religious advantages in our power. Do what we will—or rather what we can—for them, it is appalling to think of the ignorance and religious destitution in which those unfortunate children too often grow up."

"Yes," replied Baytree, "I have always felt that very strongly myself; so strongly indeed, that I may say, if I may venture without irreverence to use the words of Scripture, I 'compel them to come in.' In other words, I let my clerks clearly understand that I will not view with favour any one among them whose wife and children are not punctual attendants at church."

While this subject was being thus gravely discussed by the seniors, the younger members of the party, walking a little behind, were also engaged in interchanging the sentiments which the scene and the occasion naturally aroused in their minds.

"Does this not remind one of home?" asked Miss Hawthorn. "Is not it just like walking home from a country village church in England? The quiet and stillness, only broken by the songs of the birds; the sight of the children climbing so sedately over the churchyard stile, and then scampering down the road the moment they are fairly outside. O! I could think myself back at dear old Sedgemere, where I spent my childhood. So different from the hubbub of conversation, and the rattle of carriages, and shouting of words of command and playing of bands, which seem to din all holy thoughts out of one's head the moment we get out of church at Béshuckabad."

"For my part," said Bella, in whom the dulness of the last two days had brought on a relapse into the ill temper with which she had been afflicted on her separation from Trapton, "for my part, my religion being of the prosaic and unsentimental sort, I prefer Béshuckabad, where at any rate the service is decently performed and the singing tolerable. As for this reminding one of a village church in England, the only thing I strongly noticed that they have in common is a peculiar odour of sanctity—a pervading smell of corduroy."

"Miss Hawthorn's is the more true and philosophical view to take of the matter, however," observed Bumpas. "John Stuart Mill advises the deliberate cultivation of the religious sentiment even for men of enlightened and logical minds, whose intelligence of course is far superior to the weakness of religious belief. That is why," he condescendingly went on to explain, "I come to church sometimes."

"If that is why you go," said Bella, "I think you had better stay away."

"Partly for that reason," said Bumpas, "and partly also because it is essential to a full understanding of the phenomena of the human mind, to study and examine for oneself every error of the human intellect, however absurd or contemptible."

"Thank you, Mr. Bumpas," said Grace quietly. "I believe, however, the most effectual way of expressing contempt is by silence. Permit me to suggest your signifying your opinion of us, who come to church to pray, in that manner."

Bumpas almost felt snubbed. He began to reply with an unwonted stutter, but Shafto took the halting words out of his mouth.

"Don't be hard upon Bumpas," he said. "There is not a more useful member of the congregation, nor one who does more to help the cause of religion. He performs at church the service done by the drunken Helot at a Spartan banquet. If young Mr. De Sylva, who is just budding into adolescence, white waistcoats, and free-thought, should have imbibed any dangerous agnostic notions from the enlightened Baboos with whom he associates in his office, he has only to look at Bumpas. It may seem a fine thing to him to be an agnostic or an atheist in the abstract, but when he sees the thing in the concrete form of Bumpas, how much less alluring it appears!"

"I think we have had enough of this subject," said Grace, and added gently—she had that most excellent thing in a woman, a sweetly-toned voice—"I am sure the time will come when Mr. Bumpas will go to church with a better motive than he now avows. Whose *are* all those children?"

"Whose ever they are, I wish they had been kept at home," said Bella. "O dear, those corduroys! Why does not Major Baytree, instead of having the church crammed to suffocation in the morning, give a special children's service in the afternoon?"

Shafto burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, in which even the philosophic Bumpas was compelled to join. The picture of Baytree catechising the juvenile De Sylvas and De Rozarios was too supremely ridiculous!

"What is there to laugh at?" asked Grace, in demure displeasure at the ill-placed levity.

"O, by Jove, it is too good! Just suggest the idea to Captain Baytree, Miss Steel; but whatever you do, mind that I am there to see. I would not miss Baytree's face for a thousand rupees. Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see anything ludicrous about the matter at all," said Grace. "Captain Baytree, I thought, read the service exceedingly well. Perhaps there was just a little too much—what shall I call it?—I don't exactly mean theatricalness—"

"Well, whether he is theatrical or not, I never hear him 'producing holy writ' (which he does about once in three months, and for the Commissioner's special edification) without being reminded of a famous passage in a certain stage-play, in which an unsavoury illustration is drawn from a 'goodly apple, rotten at the core!'"

"You appear to be particularly bitter this morning, Mr. Shafto. You must surely have got out of bed on the wrong side."

"Why was not Don Quixote at church?" asked Bella. "Is he too logical to cultivate the religious sentiment even by way of a kind of philosophic joke, like Mr. Bumpas?"

"O dear, no. It needs no cultivation in him. It grows wild and luxuriantly enough, in all conscience. You would be delighted with Dr. Brandling, Miss Hawthorn. His fervour is greater even than your own. But I always feel myself a miserable Laodicean when our conversation over our pipes of an evening happens to fall upon a religious topic."

"Then why was he not at church?"

"He started last night for a forty-mile ride to Gurhi Moofsid. Some bad reports came in from there. There has long been sickness in that part of the district, arising chiefly from insufficiency of food. They have had a succession of bad harvests, though Baytree strenuously denies the fact, lest he should have to divert funds from the new canal he is making here, to be the monument of his fame and the stepping-stone to his promotion, to fritter them away in famine relief at Gurhi Moofsid. And I am afraid, Miss Steel, that—being, as he is, more subtle than any other district officer that liveth in the Mâ Bâp Provinces—he has persuaded your father to believe him."

"With all due deference," remarked Ravensmore, opening his lips for the first time, "I don't think Miss Steel need allow herself to be alarmed at the unscrupulous deception of which Mr. Steel is in danger of becoming a victim. It seems to me, perhaps not probable, but at all events barely possible, that the Deputy-Commissioner may take a sounder view of the condition of his district than that evolved from the joint lucubrations of the subordinate police-officer and the doctor of the charitable dispensary."

"O, it is nothing to me," replied Shafto, "which is wrong and which is right. But, howsoever that may be, reports were brought in last night which led Brandling to judge, or imagine, that there is danger of a regular epidemic of typhus setting in; and—as he positively revels in an infectious disease, sniffs a fever from afar as the war-horse in Job does the strife, and 'drinks delight of battle' with typhoid or cholera—the one fact I can assert as being certainly no delusion is, that he has borrowed my Waler mare and gone off to Gurhi Moofsid instead of coming decently to church, as any man with a well-regulated mind would have done."

They were by this time opposite the Commissioner's encampment, and parted company. Bella seemed to be partial to Sunday as a day for a flare-up. She had scarcely entered her tent when her mother, whose temper had also, perhaps, suffered from the odour of corduroy during Baytree's sermon, came, and began not very discreetly to upbraid her with the marked and almost rude aversion she showed for Ravensmore. She answered in a manner not such as to turn away wrath, and words began to run high—so high that Mr. Steel came in. He was just in time to hear Bella apply some epithets the reverse of respectful to her mother, and defiantly avow her unalterable affection for Rattley Trapton. It is not likely that even in her passion she would have been so rash as to do either of these things, had she been aware that her father was at hand; but her blood was up, and as he *had* heard, she would not recant her shameless avowal before him.

Then did Mr. Steel fully redeem the lack of vigour which, as I remarked, he had been guilty of in the rebuke he administered to his child on the preceding Sunday. To use a colloquialism, perhaps not quite up to the dignity of the occasion, he did "give it to her hot and strong." Bella was overwhelmed by the torrent of his denunciatory eloquence, and cowered beneath it. But though to appearance she shrank in sheer terror, the very excess of this terror aroused a demon of sullen anger and savage vengeance at her heart. Mr. Steel left her at last, with some words of relenting wrath and more tender reproach. But he little suspected the dangerous mood that he had lashed her into.

She made no reply to him, shed no tear, and received his parting kiss with sullen apathy. But as he left the tent, her eyes followed him with a gleam that was not pleasant to see. Her mother, who had been more terrified and stupefied by her husband's "quick wrath" than Bella herself, tried to soothe the girl after he had gone—threw her arms round her neck, wept on her shoulder, and vainly attempted to sob out words of blandishment; but Bella, to her dismay, roughly threw her off, sprang up, and (only metaphorically speaking, of course) spit at her with the fury of a wild cat.

Mrs. Steel turned, and followed her husband out of the tent with great perturbation. Between father and daughter this esteemed lady certainly had a hard time!

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. STEEL TREADS THE THORNY PATH OF DUTY.

THE reports of sickness at Gurhi Moofsid, which had occasioned Dr. Brandling's sudden exodus, also caused a modification of the plans of Mr. Steel and his party. Although Baytree openly pooh-poohed the doctor's alarm, and Mr. Steel himself felt little doubt that these reports were greatly exaggerated, still he did not think fit to carry his family and guest in the alleged infected neighbourhood. So, instead of Grace being consigned to the Baytrees, while Mrs. Steel carried off Bella and Ravensmore to enact an idyll amongst the pastoral scenes in the interior, it was decided that the Commissioner, accompanied by Baytree, should pay a flying visit to Gurhi Moofsid, while the ladies and Ravensmore awaited his return at Diknugger.

Before he started, however, there was one engagement which it was necessary for them to fulfil. The young Nawab had invited them to a shooting-party, a grand drive of game in a well-preserved jungle belonging to him some distance from Diknugger. On the Monday evening accordingly they made a short march from the station (the Baytrees and Shafto being added to the party) to a place where their camp was pitched for the night. And next morning, rising before the lark would have been out of bed, had he happened to be numbered amongst the fauna of Diknugger, they started for the scene of the proposed sport, which was still several miles further on.

This was destined to be a day of tribulation and woe to good Mrs. Steel; a waking nightmare of accumulated horrors, never to be forgotten while memory held a seat in the distracted globe which was encircled by the elegant pink bonnet she had donned as an appropriate and becoming headgear for the occasion—

"Never, though her mortal summers to such length of years should come
As the many-wintered crow that leads the clanging rookery home."

Not that it is right to compare her to a crow, to which she bore no resemblance whatever, as she pushed aside the curtain of her tent-door, and issued forth decked out in garments which rivalled the gorgeous hues and trailing plumage of the bird of paradise.

"My dear," mildly expostulated her husband, who had been outside for some time, when she burst on their view like Aurora from a canvas cloud, "would not a plainer dress, with a briefer train, be better suited for the jungle?"

"If you are going anywhere," was the conclusive reply, "where I cannot go in my ordinary costume, it is quite evident that it cannot be a proper place for the girls to go to either, and they had better stay at home with me."

"No, no," answered Mr. Steel. "They—Bella, at least, finds camp life dull enough at best, poor girl. And indeed that is some extenuation, though it can be no excuse, for her outburst of temper on Sunday, and the sullenness which I am grieved to see that she has maintained ever since I corrected her violence and perversity. She finds no occupation, and has nothing to do but to sit brooding over her childish fancies. For Heaven's sake, don't deprive her of what little opportunity of amusement there is. But there is really no occasion for you to come, and I don't think it is the kind of thing you would enjoy."

"I have long ago ceased to think of myself and my own enjoyment in what I do. But I do not know that it is necessary for me to go; if you like, you can take Bella, and Grace and I will stop behind."

"Nay; she, poor girl, has been looking forward to the expedition more eagerly than the keenest sportsman among us, I think. It would be hard to disappoint her. But Mrs. Baytree, I suspect, will be only too happy to remain with you."

"No, thank you," said Mrs. Steel, with decision. "If Grace goes, I go too."

The fact was that, though she had the most vague idea as to what sort of place they were going to, and what they were to do, she had gathered this much from a discussion of the arrangements which had been held amongst the gentlemen of the party at dinner the night before—viz. that some kind of ambuscade had been constructed for each one of the sportsmen separately, and that the ladies were to pair off with one or other of the gentlemen in these hiding-places, while the beaters were to drive the game through the jungle towards them. Now, her husband was quite careless and inept enough, if left to himself, to allow the cunning and audacious Miss Hawthorn so to pair off with the infatuated Ravensmore, and therefore Mrs. Steel was very firmly resolved that wherever Grace should go that day, there she would go too.

There was no road of any kind leading to the Nawab's preserve. The way to it lay right through the virgin jungle; and the original arrangement was that all the sportsmen and sportswomen should ride to the place. But when Mrs. Steel had, only on the previous morning, signified her intention of joining the party, it was obviously necessary to make an exception in her case. But the Nawab's Diwân was a man of energy and resource. And when Captain Baytree rather dubiously broached the difficulty to him, he magnanimously replied, "*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*"—or words to that effect, though possibly expressed in more vernacular language. In short, he promised that by the next morning a road should be hewn through the wilderness, practicable—not indeed for Mrs. Baytree's barouche, but for a mule carriage, which the Nawab would be only too much honoured in placing at Mrs. Steel's disposal.

It happened that there was some little delay in bringing this vehicle round to the front of the camp, and not till the horsemen, with Grace and Bella mounted on their handsome Arabs along with them, had started and were already cantering away beyond recall, did the carriage make its appearance. Mrs. Steel's heart failed her at the first glance. It looked like nothing but a fortuitous combination of atoms of rotten wood and scraps of greasy leather. The breadth of its only seat (with the exception of a sort of perch for the driver, which seemed to have been added as an after-thought) was several inches short of the diameter of that circle which Mrs. Steel's person and petticoats were accustomed to cover when she sat down. It was true that by a merciful provision of nature and of Captain Baytree, who between them had reduced Mrs. Baytree's figure to something like the dimensions of a willow wand, *she* would not take up much room. But still—well, it was too late to think of difficulties now. So, "standing not upon the order of their going," Mrs. Baytree got in first, and contrived to shrink so closely into one corner that she very nearly vanished out of sight altogether; and the Commissioner's lady followed, and plumped down, not beside, but on the top of her, her furbelowed silks swelling up and overspreading the sides and back of the little carriage, like—if so vulgar a simile may be used without irreverence—the head on a pot of porter.

But the vehicle itself was the least unpromising part of the turn-out. It was drawn by a pair of the most vicious-looking brutes of mules one would wish to set eyes on, much less sit behind. And the harness which attached these beasts to it seemed to have been constructed out of all the odds and ends of old rope, discarded buckles, and shreds of cast-off puggries which could be picked up in the castle ditch, the recognised repository of all suchlike articles at Zoolumkote. And lastly, they were driven by a wild, ragged, devil-may-care looking fellow, as little like one's idea of what an elderly lady's coachman should, in the eternal fitness of things, be, as could well be conceived.

But let me do Mrs. Steel full justice. Though she noted all this with lively terror, not for one moment did she falter in her constant mind between fear and duty. The thought of Grace and Ravensmore seated together behind a bush nerved her. Death, torture, limbs scattered broadcast among broken axle-trees and wheel-spokes, were all as naught in comparison with this. As for Mrs. Baytree, her husband had ordered her to drive with the Commissioner's wife ; and in comparison with the fear of his displeasure she would have thought nothing of mounting a high dog-cart drawn by a wild elephant, or jumping on an alligator bare-backed.

Their wild charioteer shook the loose reins, uttered a hideous yell, and brought down the heavy thong of his whip on the quarters of the off mule. The brute, though taken by surprise, had enough presence of mind to heave the injured part high in air and fling its heels within half an inch of the driver's nose, dropping them again *outside* the trace. But this latter accident was regarded by the coachman as a trifle which it would have been ridiculous to waste time in setting right. The other mule, of a more timid and submissive disposition, albeit of greater bodily strength, dashed off at full speed on hearing the crack of the whip, and dragged its recalcitrant companion along with it. Another heavy smack over the eyes effectually turned the more spirited beast's energies also in the right direction, and in another moment both of them were galloping at full stretch, the frail carriage, in spite of its substantial ballast, bumping and bounding and clattering behind them like a tin kettle tied to a dog's tail. Mrs. Steel shrieked to the coachman ; but unhappily in the rattle of the wheels, every spoke of which was loose, he mistook her alternate commands and entreaties to stop for objurgations at the slowness of his pace, and only flogged and shouted with redoubled vigour.

Things were bad enough while they kept to the regular road, along which their course lay for a mile or so, instead of at once striking straight across country, as the riders had done. But suddenly, without a moment's warning, or slackening speed in the least, the carriage turned off the road at an acute angle, over a ditch, and then away across the fields, zigzagging like a rocket, along village footpaths, intersected at every fifty yards by aqueducts banked up two feet high. Mrs. Steel felt like the mariner described by the

Psalmist—carried up to heaven and down again to the deep—and her soul melted because of her trouble.

But a worse stage yet was to follow in that dreadful ride. They now left the open fields behind, and entered the dense jungle through which the Diwân's hastily-improvised avenue had been cut during the night. Considering the short time allowed for his pioneering operations and the darkness in which they had to be performed, that worthy steward is scarcely to be blamed if the surface of the road was a good deal chequered with clefts and fissures, and the space cut through the thicket, in no place more than barely wide enough for the carriage to pass, was here and there so narrow that only the wheels on one side could keep the path, while those on the other were whirled over the roots of trees and the branches of bushes. But little he recked of this, that fiendish charioteer—

"And forward! forward! on they go;
High snort the straining steeds;
Thick pants the driver's labouring breath,
As headlong on he speeds.

'O villain! why this savage haste?'"

the breathless Mrs. Steel continued to gasp, in accents of mingled terror, indignation, and despair. But in vain!

"Fled past on right and left, how fast,
Each forest, grove, and bower!"

till at last one terrific jolt shot the unhappy lady into the air, so high that for one awful, quivering moment she verily thought that she had passed beyond the influence of the earth's gravity and been whisked off into space. But she did, at length, come down again—and with a vengeance. Instead of bumping back, as she had hitherto done, much to the alleviation of her own lot, though perhaps not to that of Mrs. Baytree, into the latter's lap, this time, unluckily, her feet came down first on the floor of the carriage. With a crack and a scrunch that sounded even above the clatter of the wheels and the yells of the coachman, and seemed to Mrs. Steel as awful as the very crack of doom, the frail boards gave way. In another moment the Commissioner's wife would have been "footing it" for dear life between the whirling wheels, at the tail of the fiendish driver and his demon mules. But even at this awful moment help was at hand. A tall form stood right before them in the path and barred their onward way. Suddenly, as if yielding to some potent spell, the coachman ceased his horrid din, and dropped his tired whip-hand listless by his side, and though the "furious barbs," snorting fire and foam, did not

"With a fearful bound
Dissolve at once in empty air,
And leave her on the ground,"

they took an equally satisfactory course, and one less startling to the nerves—that is, they stood stock-still.

Mrs. Steel, not knowing how brief this respite from destruction might be, wisely lost no time in precipitating herself from the fatal vehicle, not greatly heeding how much she trampled upon Mrs. Baytree's toes in doing so. So eager was her haste, that she would probably have fallen on her nose, had she not been caught in a close embrace by—Mr. Rattley Trapton!

"By Jove! they are good uns to go, and no mistake!" remarked that gentleman, as he placed her upright on her feet again. "I must apologise for stopping you, but—"

"O! thank Heaven you did!" exclaimed Mrs. Steel, the bare idea of what would have happened, had he allowed them to pass by, making her very blood run cold. "I will not get into that thing again; I would rather perish by the wayside. I will walk the rest of the way, if it is fifty miles!"

"You will find walking through this jungle anything but pleasant, I fear," said Trapton; "and a lace mantle, a long train, and a French bonnet are not exactly the articles of attire best adapted for scrambling through bramble-bushes, Mrs. Steel."

"I don't care. Nothing shall induce me to seat myself behind that murderer again. Ah, you blackguard," she added in Hindustani, addressing the coachman, who sat grinning on his perch, as if he expected commendation for the splendid pace at which he had brought them along, "I will have you put in the lock-up the moment we get to the Sahib. You base-born person! you shall be soundly flogged for this day's work, you shall see."

"Really, it is impossible for you to walk; the road further on is far worse than what you have come—full of ravines," expostulated Trapton. "Do get in, Mrs. Steel. I will tell the man not to drive quite so fast."

"I tell you I will not. The man would certainly break my neck now, in order that I might not tell my husband to have him flogged."

"Well, then, will you trust me to drive you?"

"Ahem!" replied Mrs. Steel, suddenly checking the impetuous, hurried utterance with which she had hitherto spoken. She had been so completetly taken up by her own rage and terror, that she had not taken thought of who it was to whom she owed her rescue. But this proposal of Trapton's brought her to her senses, and "gave her pause."

"Ahem! I must say, Mr. Trapton," she said, "I must say you are the last person I expected to meet here."

"Or wished to meet either, your tone seems to imply," answered he. "But my presence is soon accounted for. I heard casually that the Nawab was to have a big drive to-day, though I had no idea there would be ladies in the party; and our fellows, having a general invitation from him to shoot in his preserves, I thought I would ride over; so laid out a couple of horses and started last night after mess. An additional gun, I thought, is never unwelcome on such occasions."

(Here we may parenthetically indulge our wonder as to who might have been Mr. Trapton's "casual" informant.)

"Well," replied Mrs. Steel, in a tone in which hauteur contended with gratitude for the inestimable service which Trapton had so recently rendered her—I mean, of course, that kind of gratitude which consisted in the sense of the possibility of a similar service being needed again, before she got out of her present predicament—"well, I am afraid Mr. Steel would be rather surprised at your joining us."

"O, I don't think so. Fellows often turn up in this promiscuous sort of way at these kind of affairs."

"But in the present instance, you see," resumed Mrs. Steel, "we are in a somewhat different position from what might ordinarily be the case. We are not ourselves the entertainers on this occasion. And in short, though I am exceedingly sorry for your disappointment after your long journey, I feel sure that Mr. Steel would not like to add to the number of the Nawab's guests without first consulting him."

"O, very well! I am the last man to intrude my company where it is not welcome. I have only reckoned without my host, that is all, and must trot back. Shall I assist you into the carriage before I go, Mrs. Steel, and tell the man to—*drive on?*"

The last words, spoken with portentous emphasis, were too much for Mrs. Steel. And I ask, can she fairly be blamed for her weakness? It was indeed an agonising dilemma: either to trudge two miles through the wilderness on foot, or to submit to martyrdom by the most horrible form of death ever invented by human cruelty, breaking on the wheel; or herself to reintroduce the banished and obnoxious Trapton into her family circle. The last alternative was indeed a bitter one; but poor human nature recoiled from the others. So in the end Trapton's horse, which he had left tied to a bush hard by, was consigned to the deposed charioteer; and the young officer, mounting on the vacant perch, took the greasy reins and drove the two ladies with the most tender care and circumspection to the spot, on the outskirts of the preserve, where the rest of the party were awaiting them.

Lest the reader should share in Mrs. Steel's surprise in meeting Trapton in a place where he had so little business—of any legitimate sort, at least—it may be as well to consider the probable motives for his coming there. He had felt by no means easy at the possible results of the enemy's strategical movement to Diknugger. He could not contemplate without alarm the idea of Ravensmore and Bella being thrown together in all the dulness of camp life. He had not great faith in the lady's constancy, and he had very lively faith in the proverb, "Out of sight out of mind." He therefore resolved at all risks that he must deprive Bella of the chance of forgetting him. "Yepishtolary correspondensh," as Edie Ochiltree calls it, was at present impracticable. He had made more than one attempt to get a letter to her hand, but had found that Mr. Steel had established a blockade which there was no running. There remained nothing for it but to follow the Steels in their retreat, and make a bold attempt to obtain another clandestine interview with Bella. So, hearing of the proposed drive in the Nawab's preserve, he determined to go thither, in the hope that while the party were scattered in their several places of concealment, he might find an opportunity of at least handing a note to his lady-love unobserved.

Fortune, as we have seen, favoured his bold enterprise to an extent which his wildest hopes could not have anticipated. Making his way towards the preserve, with a view to reconnoitre the enemy, by a somewhat circuitous route, in order to avoid coming unexpectedly in collision with them, he had fallen right across Mrs. Steel's path.

The surprise of the Commissioner, of Grace Hawthorn, and of Bella herself at seeing him drive up on such evidently amicable terms with Mrs. Steel, may be more easily imagined than described. But explanations were impossible, and the ejection of the intruder more so, with Baytree, Ravensmore, and the others standing by. Mrs. Steel merely said, "O, we have had *such* a drive! It is a mercy you see us here instead of our mangled corpses. We should certainly have been dashed to pieces, if it had not been for Mr. Trapton." In acknowledgment of the inestimable service thus brought to his notice, Mr. Steel cautiously responded, "O!"

But though Trapton had won one move, Mrs. Steel had no notion of giving him up the game. She resolved to take good care that he should have no chance of saying a word to Bella, unheard by her, until such time as he could be decently shaken off again. Her first idea was to make Bella sit by her during the "drive;" but that involved losing the unique chance of forcing her and Ravensmore into each other's company which the opportunity afforded, and she could not make up her mind to that sacrifice. So instead of sheltering her endangered chick under her wing, she determined to hold the endangering kite there.

"Mrs. Baytree," she said, "you of course will sit with Mr. Steel. Charles Ravensmore, I trust my dear child to you; mind you take great care of her. Mr. Shafto, Miss Hawthorn, I know, may be safely committed to your protection. And—"

"And I," said Baytree, taking the word out of her mouth, with a most gallant bow, and his hand on his heart, "am to have the distinguished honour of escorting Mrs. Steel."

"No, you are not," said she, more decidedly than politely. "Ahem! that is," she explained, seeing that the energetic curtness of her refusal had pierced even the triple brass of Captain Baytree's panoply of self-satisfaction, "I need not say I should only be too charmed to have your company, but Mr. Trapton has already come once to our rescue so gallantly to-day, that I think I shall feel myself especially safe under his care. So," she added, resuming her tone of decision, "I must retain you as my squire, Mr. Trapton."

It was a clever counter-move. But Trapton was a cool gamester; and Fortune had already so strikingly favoured him, that he felt sure she would not so soon leave him in the lurch again. He therefore expressed his satisfaction at this arrangement with such a show of genuine heartiness, that for a moment Mrs. Steel was almost taken in, and Bella's eyes flashed with anger at his meek quiescence.

A few minutes' walk along a broad belt of sand, the dry bed of a stream which, during the rainy season, poured down from the neighbouring hills, brought them to the place where they were to take up their positions for the first "drive." This belt of sand was fringed on both sides with dense jungle growing right down to its margin. And along one bank six or eight little platforms, or crows'-nests, raised about five feet from the ground, had been constructed by propping so many of the small cots used by the country-people—a mere light frame of wood, with a matting of plaited string stretched across it—amongst the tough branches of some of the larger bushes. These were placed at intervals of about a hundred yards apart, and were cunningly concealed towards the river-bed by screens of loose boughs, from behind which the sportsmen were to fire as the game—beast and bird—driven by beaters from the further side of the jungle, rushed or flew across the open space.

When they reached the first of the *machâms* (such is the native name for these crows'-nests), Mr. Steel, observing that the trudge through the heavy sand was telling upon his wife's lungs, suggested that she should take possession of it. When Mrs. Steel, after some difficulty, at last discovered the perch to which she was expected to ascend, her heart once more sank within her, and she protested that nothing should induce her to commit her person to such a frail support.

"O, it is quite firm," said Trapton encouragingly, seizing the stoutest branch of the bush and giving it a vigorous shake, which seemed to threaten to bring the whole thing down about his ears.

"Well, I certainly do think," said Bella, with touching solicitude for her mother's safety, "that you had better not take anybody else up there with you, mamma."

"I tell you I will not get up at all," answered her mamma sharply. "I think it would be extremely indelicate for me to climb up into a thing like that. There, Mr. Trapton, you get up, if you please, and I will sit on the bank here."

"All right," said Trapton cheerfully, preparing to obey.

"There will be very little real danger in your sitting on the ground, for if a boar should happen to charge you, I shall be up here, you know, to shoot him. I am not an A1 hand with a rifle, but I daresay—"

"Captain Baytree, is it a fact that there are wild boars in this jungle?" exclaimed Mrs. Steel, interrupting.

Baytree, seeing how eager she was for a reply in the negative to this inquiry, was just preparing his face to express the extreme derision with which he intended to scout the bare idea of Trapton's suggestion having the smallest foundation in fact, while he rapidly resolved to surreptitiously station men in the jungle on the other side of the river-bed to drive back any of the obnoxious beasts which might attempt to cross it and so belie his denial, when Mr. Steel replied instead of him,

"Why, my dear, it is full of them."

"Then what am I to do?"

"Get into the *machâm;* I assure you there is not the least fear of its falling. Or, if you will not, you had better return and sit in the carriage."

Once more there was a hard tussle in her bosom between duty and terror. But again the former remained victorious. She could not take Trapton back with her to the carriage, and thus deprive him of all share in the sport, without attracting remark. So at last, with a despairing groan, she allowed herself to be helped up a rough sort of ladder at the back of the *machâm*. And certainly the rocking and crackling and creaking, as she seated herself in the "cradle on the tree top," afforded an apparent justification of her alarm. Trapton, adopting Bella's prudent warning, to which Mrs. Steel gave a silent approval, did not attempt to take his place beside her; indeed, her ample petticoats so completely submerged the whole surface of the cot, that he could only have done so by seating himself in her lap, a proceeding which would have considerably enhanced the indelicacy which Mrs. Steel had already attributed to her position.

The rest passed on to distribute themselves among the other *machâms* along the line. Presently the sound of voices was hushed. Natives ceased to run backwards and forwards to fetch rugs to soften the hardships of the matted seats, or to replace a case of No. 16-bore cartridges which had been put on a *machâm* with a 12-bore gun. And now no sign of life or motion was seen in the river-bed, and the stillness of the surrounding waste was only broken by the call of partridges and the cooing of doves. Trapton saw the necessity of some decisive step, unless the whole purpose of his long night's ride and the advantage the lucky accident, which had so unexpectedly favoured him, were to be lost. Time was slipping by. Even already his quick ear could just catch the first faint sound of the tom-toms and shouts of the beaters in the far distance. Once the drive was over, he knew that Mr. and Mrs. Steel would soon find an opportunity for explanations, and if he were not summarily bundled off, Bella would certainly be removed under her father's custody. He must make an opportunity of speaking to her alone, now or never. Ten minutes—five—would be sufficient for his purpose. But Mrs. Steel watched him like a cat, and would not let him leave her side for an instant. Of course he might have disregarded her prohibitions and left her. She was as secure on the *machâm* as in a trap, for she could not have descended from it without either his help or a broken neck. But it was essential to his present purpose that no fresh suspicion of his designs upon Bella should be aroused.

Something, however, must be done. So, declaring that something was wrong with the lock of his gun, he insisted, notwithstanding Mrs. Steel's protests, in leaving her to go and borrow a knife from the occupant of the next *machâm*. He would not be absent one minute, he assured her. When he disappeared among the bushes Mrs. Steel felt sure that this promise would not be kept, but that Trapton had actually gone off to Bella. She hesitated what to do, whether to adopt the desperate resource of attempting to get down from the *machâm*, or to take the almost equally desperate one of shrieking for assistance. But while she thus wavered in doubt, to her intense surprise Trapton returned. He certainly had not had time to go beyond the nearest *machâm*, scarcely even, it seemed, to have gone so far. And Mrs. Steel had heard it settled that Ravensmore and Bella were to occupy the one at the end of the line farthest from hers, at least six hundred yards off. The nearest one to her own she had also heard assigned to Shafto and Grace.

"Did not get the knife after all," remarked Trapton, as he returned to his station at the foot of her bush. "He had not got one. Rum thing, a secretary not having a penknife, isn't it?"

"Secretary? whom do you mean?" asked Mrs. Steel quickly. "Mr. Shafto is in the next place, is he not?"

"Don't know his name," replied Trapton. "The young fellow who is staying with you, I mean. Somebody told me he was a secretary."

"You must mean Mr. Ravensmore. Is he in the next thing? I thought it was arranged that he and my daughter were to go into the furthest one."

"I don't know his name," repeated Trapton. "But Miss Steel is not with him; it is Miss Hawthorn."

"Miss Hawthorn!" screamed Mrs. Steel. "Take me down. Let me down. I insist upon getting down." And with a precipitancy which nearly brought her to the ground head foremost, with the *machâm* on the top of her, she descended.

"Take me to them. Take me to them this moment, I insist," she continued, rushing off towards the river-bed.

"Stop, stop! you can't go that way," cried Trapton; "you will frighten all the game if you show yourself in the open. Follow me, and I will bring you to their *machâm* in five seconds. It is close by."

And so saying he led the way into the jungle. Mr. Trapton's five seconds must be regarded as a figure of speech. At all events, he led Mrs. Steel through the wilderness for at least five minutes, which seemed to her nearer five hours. And yet he walked fast enough, so fast that she could barely keep him in sight amongst the tangled undergrowth. She would have called to him to go slower, but while she continued to hurry after him she had not breath to do so, and she dared not pause a moment for fear of losing sight of him, and being left behind—deserted, lost, like a well-grown Babe-in-the-Woods. He zigzagged about too in a most eccentric manner; not, as it seemed to her, in order to avoid the most dense and impenetrable brakes, but rather to seek them out. Now he would lead her through a forest of grass growing higher than herself, through which she could only trace his course by the waving of the feathery tops as he pushed them aside. And presently emerging from this, he would plunge, like another wise man of Islington, into the very midst of a tangled mass of thorns, to avoid the lacerating branches of which, that "low overarched embowered," she had to stoop nearly double. Three several times did an "envious sliver" snatch Mrs. Steel's French bonnet from her head. The torn shreds of her gloves (so it seemed at least to her tortured mind and body) were only kept on her hands by the thorns which had run through them into the flesh, and there broken off short. Her sweeping train was wofully curtailed. And she might have traced her way back by the scraps of her lace mantle which she had left fluttering on successive bushes.

At last, when she was on the point of dropping from sheer exhaustion, her guide paused.

"Where—where have you—brought me to?" she gasped.

"Dash it! why, that is just what I can't tell you," said Trapton. "I am afraid I have missed the way."

"Missed the way! How dare you!" began Mrs. Steel, in a towering rage. But he interrupted with an alarmed "Hush! what is that?" and pointed to a dark cluster of undergrowth a few yards off.

Mrs. Steel's anger melted away in a moment, and she clung convulsively to his arm. "What is it?" she whispered.

"It is like," replied he, in a voice of suppressed agitation, "it is like a wild boar stealing down upon us."

"O, what shall we do? we shall be torn in pieces!" cried Mrs. Steel, in an agony of terror.

"No, no. There need be no fear," said Trapton, with palpably forced composure. "If you only keep your presence of mind. The great thing is, when he charges, stand perfectly still until his tusks are within about half a foot of your knees, and then suddenly spring straight up in the air and at the same moment throw your feet wide apart. He will pass under you without your receiving a scratch. Coolness is all that is necessary, and—some degree of activity, of course. But I don't think it is a boar after all. Let us try in this direction; we *must* be near some of the *machâms*."

They set off again. But luckily Mrs. Steel's endurance was not tried much longer. A faint but most welcome fragrance of tobacco reached their panting nostrils, and guided by it they soon came in sight of a *machâm*, on which reclined Captain Baytree very much at his ease, smoking a cigar, with his eyes shut, his hands clasped as a pillow under his head, and his feet supported at a high level by a stout branch. It may be remarked in passing, though the circumstance has no direct bearing on the course of this history, or the fate of the several persons whose doings are the subject thereof, that the cot which formed the seat of this particular *machâm* was half as large again as any of the others, and matted with soft cotton string instead of the hard, prickly, hempen twine which served for the rest.

"Hullo! what has brought you here, Mrs. Steel?" exclaimed the Captain, waking up.

"Ahem! I wanted to speak to Mr. Steel," was the unscrupulous reply; it was not expedient to take Captain Baytree into her confidence on the subject of Grace and Ravensmore. "But we missed his *machâm*."

"Ah, his is the next. Just beyond that highest tree there."

"O, I will not take another step through this frightful jungle!" replied Mrs. Steel. "I am nearly dead as it is."

"Ah," said Trapton, in a voice of respectful compassion, "I was afraid Mrs. Steel would find it very fatiguing walking through the long grass, but she *insisted* on my bringing her."

"Where is my daughter?" asked Mrs. Steel of Baytree.

"She is in that one at the end, with young Ravensmore. I have this moment been talking to them. I got tired of sitting up here; the position is rather cramped. Besides, I was anxious to see that all was right, so I descended and took a turn up and down the line. I had just got back and lighted my cigar when you came."

"Then why did you tell me," said Mrs. Steel, turning on Trapton, with fury in her eyes, "that Mr. Ravensmore was with Miss— that is, in the next thing to ours?"

"I told you I did not know his name," replied Trapton. "I said the young fellow you have out with you—Captain Baytree's secretary, I believe he is. Tall man with broad shoulders."

"O, you mean Shafto!" said Baytree. "He is down the other way, with Miss Hawthorn. I have just taken a peep at them too, but they looked so exceedingly well satisfied with each other—billing and cooing like a couple of turtle-doves on a twig, in fact—that I thought it a pity to go near. But had you not better go on to Mr. Steel's *machâm*, or back to your own? The beaters are getting near."

"Not another step will I go," replied Mrs. Steel, with an energy which there was no gainsaying.

So the conclusion of the matter was that Mrs. Steel had to swallow her ill-humour as best she could and take possession of Captain Baytree's *machâm*, which that gallant officer yielded to her with "only too delighted" on his lips, and "confound the fidgety old woman" at his heart. Trapton went back for the rug which Mrs. Steel had left in her own *machâm*, but dutifully returned to his attendance on her within a quarter of an hour, which, judging from her late experience, Mrs. Steel could not regard as an unreasonable length of time for the purpose. The truthful historian is, however, constrained to state that Mr. Trapton was much more fortunate in finding his way through the jungle this time than he had previously been; that he was also lucky enough not to encounter any patches of high grass or a single troublesome thicket; that, after taking Mrs. Steel's rug from the *machâm* at one extremity of the line, he proceeded with astonishing rapidity to that occupied by Mr. Ravensmore and Bella at the other extremity; that, on his arrival, Mr. Ravensmore, who had not found his *tête-à-tête* with Miss Steel particularly animating or agreeable, said he would get down and stretch his legs by a turn up and down; that, in order to avoid startling any game which might be approaching, he retired a little way into the jungle behind; and that Trapton had thus attained the object which he had used so much pains and ingenuity to secure, and had full five minutes' private conversation with Bella. He was more than reassured by the frame of mind he found her in, and he returned to Captain Baytree's *machâm* with a look of triumph on his handsome face, which it was almost more than he could do to suppress in the presence of Bella's injured mother, whom he had treated with such atrocious cruelty and falsehood.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE.

"O, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away!"

MEANWHILE Grace Hawthorn, innocently unconscious of all the immeasurable troubles which her (assumed) delinquencies were bringing down upon her patroness's head, and which were sure to be carefully cherished in the said patroness's heart and added to the already large account of her malignant feelings towards the girl, had taken her place in the *machâm* assigned her, very demurely, as was her wont, but with a heart beating so fast that she was afraid that its agitation must be optically and aurally apparent to the whole party. The arrangement which gave her Shafto as her partner was one she felt truly grateful to Mrs. Steel for, whatever may have been the motive which prompted it.

Whether Shafto on his part, in his innermost heart, may or may not have shared in this gratitude, I will not undertake to say. He has himself assured me that the case was quite the reverse; that he bitterly resented Miss Hawthorn's acquiescence in Mrs. Steel's proposal that they should sit together. Knowing his unchanged love for her, knowing how she had encouraged it the summer before, the smallest delicacy or kindliness of feeling should have opposed her consenting to a long *tête-à-tête* which, in the altered state of her own heart and views—views that he conceived she had, since their meeting again, taken unnecessarily palpable pains that he should learn beyond all possibility of mistake—must be a mockery and insult to him. His appearance, at any rate, denoted anything but exuberant satisfaction. He followed Trapton's example in not mounting the *machâm* along with his fair partner, though she laughingly sat down at the extreme verge of the little platform, and gathered in the skirts of her riding-habit to make room for him in the most bewitching way. But he took no notice of the action, and remained moodily leaning against the back of the *machâm,* one foot resting on a rung of the rough ladder, and his hands listlessly laid one upon the other on the muzzle of his gun.

And yet if the man had eyes in his head, how could he have resisted that mute invitation? It might have charmed the demon of jealousy out of a score of fancifully despondent lovers. Nay, had matters been even worse with him, had her cruelty already driven him to despair and suicide, the sunshine of her returning kindness should have been enough to "create a soul under the ribs of death," and animate his corpse, and make it spring nimbly to her side. But Shafto was "compact of thankless earth," and stood unmoved and stolid as a stock or stone.

I can picture Grace Hawthorn as she sat on her sylvan throne, and few more delightful paintings hang in the gallery of my imagination. I see the dark wealth of lustreless brown, almost black, hair coiled in loose soft folds beneath the broad brim of her gray wide-awake hat. It has not been so carefully secured in her hasty early morning toilet but that the gallop through the jungle has shaken down a vagrant lock, which falls with a sweeping wave over her shoulder. The ride and the crisp morning air have also lent an additional tint to the bright and healthy crimson, which warms the dark but exquisitely clear complexion of her delicately-rounded cheeks. Grace, it is true, fell far short of possessing Mary Lee's almost perfect beauty of face, though, as Mr. Steel had told her, her likeness to her mother was nevertheless very striking. Her features were less regular, less exquisitely chiselled ; but in expression she had the advantage in the comparison. In her, the sunny brightness, which, as I have described in earlier chapters, used only to flit across Mary Lee's pensive countenance at rare and passing intervals, was habitual. But besides this, in the sunlight of Grace's eyes there were rays—and those amongst the loveliest in the prism—which had been wanting in that of Mary's. It was doubtless less the fault of nature than of the untoward circumstances of her early training, which had rendered it impossible that Mary Lee's face should reflect the bold, frank, pure truthfulness and trustfulness which beamed in that of her child.

Such were the points of resemblance and diversity between the mother and daughter in face. In all other respects the one was the exact reprint of the other. Grace's figure, of the middle height, firm and compact, but wondrously soft in contour and lithe of movement—the proud sweep of the neck and shoulders, the broad chest, and the waist, not too slender, but seeming slimmer than it really was from the magic effect of its exquisitely-traced curves—this was the very same form which, standing on the edge of the cliff above the Clink Pool, had enraptured the sight of Campion more than twenty years before. The little foot, with its high-arched instep and bewitching ankle, which had just peeped out beneath the gray skirt of Grace Hawthorn's habit, as it was lightly but firmly planted on the rough ladder of the *machâm*, was the very counterpart of that which had once been wont to trip so boldly over the rough crags, and so vigorously brush aside the thick heather of the Slagby moors. And it might have been an echo of the deliciously musical voice that in the far-away past had exchanged fervent vows with James Pearson—and, alas! murmured consenting words also in the ear of George Steel—which now gently broke upon the hushed silence of the jungle, and aroused Shafto from his sullen reverie.

"You don't seem disposed to flatter my vanity with a very demonstrative show of gratification at the way Mrs. Steel has 'sorted' us."

"O, I am delighted, I am sure," replied Shafto, without lifting the beard which rested on his woful breast.

"How kind of you to say so! But are you not going to talk?" inquired Grace.

"We must not talk," replied Shafto; "it would frighten the game."

"Yes, of course, if you have to call out to me up here, and I have to answer you down there. But if you will condescend to sit beside me, we sha'n't. Don't you remember how the monkeys on the hillside at Simla used to play and chatter all round us, and peer at us over the edge of the big stone we used to sit under? Our voices used not to be so clamorous as to scare away the birds and beasts *then*."

And then followed just a little sigh, to wind up the period.

"Why do you talk of Simla?" answered Shafto roughly; but he so far yielded to the force of that gentle suspiration that he changed his listless attitude, and turning round towards the *machâm*, rested both arms on it while he looked up into Grace's face. "Are even you not without the heartless vanity of your sex, but must play with the wounds you have made? Or is it possible that you can believe that I was no more in earnest than yourself last summer, and that we can while away the hour or so that Fate and Mrs. Steel have willed that we are to pass together in renewing the old amusement with equal gratification on both sides?"

"I was quite in earnest too," murmured Grace.

"Then if you were, it is all the greater madness and folly in me to stand talking to you here. I will go and sit behind that bush, and smoke a pipe."

"No; don't leave me here alone. I shall be terrified. You heard what Mr. Steel said about the wild boars."

"Wild boars don't climb up into *machâms*," replied Shafto curtly.

"Then in that respect they are like a certain other savage animal that I know," said Grace.

"Yes, I *am* savage, Miss Hawthorn," answered Shafto, "and I have right good cause to be so."

"You speak as if *I* had given you some cause. How have I done so?"

"How have you done so!" echoed Shafto; but though an echo, his words sounded very unlike the original question—the one murmured as softly as the cooing of a sucking dove, the other enunciated in quite Bully Bottom's other style, with an energy that might have moved Duke Theseus to cry "Let him roar again." "How have you done so! Pray *do* you remember anything at all of last summer, or of Simla? Or has all that you did, all that you said, all that you looked, faded and dropped from your thoughts like summer blossoms—melted and clean gone from your memory, like the snow from the top of the Chore?"

"Of course I have not forgotten. Did I not make a conquest of a member of Council, and should have had an offer, so everybody said, if that horrid deficit (whatever a deficit be) had not come in the way and put me out of his head? That is not a triumph that a poor girl like me is likely to forget."

"Then as your memory is so very tenacious, possibly you may retain a faint recollection of a very much humbler individual who ventured to place himself in rivalry with the august victim of the seductions of the deficit. By a great effort, perhaps, you may call to mind certain rides around Jacko, a certain walk up the hill one evening from Anandale, a certain mossy seat under the shade of the cedars below Fairoaks. Do you remember, Miss Hawthorn, the words you said to me as we sat on that seat the evening before I left Simla, and the voice in which you said them? The words, I assure you, were tender, and the voice was soft and tremulous—ah! sweet, low, and thrilling as an angel's whisper."

"But why should that make you savage?" inquired the same voice, which, even now, had by no means lost all the qualities attributed to it. "Do you mean that my company and conversation bored you so much as to have permanently soured your temper, and made you a mis—mis—I forget the word; only I know it means a hater of Misses?"

Shafto treated this ill-timed levity with the scornful disregard which it deserved.

"But now," he continued, "I meet you again, when only six months have passed, and you will scarcely speak to me—barely condescend to notice my presence. O no! you have neither eyes nor ears now for any one but young Apollo. With the greatest difficulty I do manage to snatch—much against your will—an opportunity to speak half a dozen words to you alone, to tell you of a subject in which you professed to be by no means uninterested when we last met, and what am I told for my pains? 'You are really very sorry, but you don't know what on earth I am talking about.' Women, of course we all know, are privileged to be fair and false, and make a pastime of trifling with a man's serious feelings. But let me tell you, Miss Hawthorn, that there is a point, even in feminine manners, when flippancy becomes impertinence, and that you attained to that point the other evening."

"You *will* mistake the meaning of my observations," said Grace, who seemed bent on framing her answers by the precepts of the Wise King. "My mind at the moment was greatly distracted by something which had just occurred to—by something that had happened that day, at least. I really did not hear what you said—not from any want of interest in what concerns you; for I was— I always shall be truly glad to hear of your good fortune, and still more of the success of your own efforts."

"O, of course, of course," said Shafto. "Why don't you add that you will always look upon me as a brother? That is quite the regulation formula for casting off the discarded lover; just like the Mohammedan's solemn declaration that he regards his old wife in the light of his mother when he wants to divorce her in order to take a young and pretty one—only the parts played by the respective sexes differ under our Christian usage. But—though perhaps it is rude to say so—I don't want sympathy or the congratulations of Mrs. Ravensmore."

"You have rightly described your speech," replied Grace, flashing out. "It is indeed a rudeness that I never expected to hear from your lips. Be satisfied now, Mr. Shafto; my unintentional 'impertinence' to you the other evening has been amply repaid."

"I don't want to say things to hurt you, Miss Hawthorn—God knows. But that is just it. Do you suppose that after what passed last summer, and what has passed, what is happening now, I can be with you like this alone, and exchange small-talk and pay you pretty compliments? Bah! a beast that wants discourse of reason—a superseded lap-dog—would snarl and snap under the circumstances; and do you expect me to be tamer than a poodle?"

"Well, whether you are a poodle or a wild boar, and whether you claim the privilege of behaving like one or both, remember that calling names is not part of it; neither of them can do that, and *you* shall not."

"What is the good of going on like this? The long and short of it is, that a few months ago you let me speak to you as a lover. Now you choose to let somebody else do so. And you can't expect me to go back contentedly to commonplace tittle-tattle. I'll go and smoke over there."

"You shall do nothing of the sort. Mrs. Steel committed me to your care, and I will not be deserted like the Babes in the Wood in this howling wilderness. And another thing, Mr. Shafto: you will please talk of things you know something about. Pray, sir, have you ever *heard* 'somebody else' speak to me as—in the way you mention?"

"Has not that fellow Ravensmore done so?" asked Shafto. And this was a counter-question to which, it must be confessed, Grace had most unskilfully laid herself open, and which she would have found it difficult to parry. But her blundering opponent, instead of dropping his foil after this "palpable hit," followed it up by a succession of wild thrusts which were much more easily put aside. "Of course you know he has. If you are not at this moment actually engaged to him, you know that you have practically won your game—I don't blame you for playing it, mind—and that the prize is as surely within your reach as if your hand had actually closed on it."

"Well, I have heard that lookers-on see more of a game than those who play it; but I never knew before they could see a game being played when the players themselves were quite unconscious of being engaged in anything of the sort."

"You can scarcely intend that to pass. When a young lady allows a gentleman, whom all the other young ladies and their mammas unite in regarding as one of the biggest fishes in Indian waters, to be constantly dangling at her side; when she ostentatiously favours him with nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles, and will scarcely deign to notice anybody else while he is by; when she walks about secluded alleys in the garden with him for an hour together by moonlight—as you did on the evening of the Baytrees' dinner-party; and when the triumph of her success is so palpable that her guardian (who would like to hook the fish for her own daughter) can't conceal her rage and disappointment, but exhibits them in the face of everybody with ridiculous candour—"

"What do you mean by that?" interrupted Grace, in surprise and disquietude; for it is a fact, though ill-natured readers may perhaps not be very ready to believe it, that she had never observed the annoyance which Ravensmore's attentions to her had caused Mrs. Steel. "Do you mean to say that you have noticed anything to make you think that Mrs. Steel does not like—that is, that she thinks—"

"Noticed! Everybody has noticed it. And if you have really not done so yourself, I can only say that you have deprived yourself of the only valid excuse for your behaviour to me and Ravensmore. To pay off the slights and ill-usage you have received from that woman would have been an end that might have gone far to justify means which, of themselves, are open to being described by some very harsh adjectives."

"I had no idea of that," said Grace thoughtfully. "And you must not speak of Mrs. Steel in that way, Mr. Shafto. I owe such a boundless debt of gratitude to Mr. Steel that I should indeed be unworthy—not of all the kindness he has shown to the orphan girl who had no claims whatever on him, of that I can never be worthy—but of the good opinion of any one—of you yourself—if I suffered those who are dearest to him to be spoken ill of in my presence. But really, Mr. Shafto, you have got a most perverse notion into your head, and I ought to be very angry with you for daring to tell me of it to my face. Even if Mr. Ravensmore were such a foolish, thoughtless boy as to let his fancy beguile him into any serious thoughts in connection with me—instead of being, as he is, a young man of prudence and sobriety of judgment quite beyond his years—I, at any rate, hope I have too much good sense to allow my vanity to blind me to the certainty of ultimate unhappiness. How do you suppose Mr. Ravensmore's lordly relations would receive into their family a girl whose birth—whose birth is a subject that must not be spoken of? And though you are quite wrong and mistaken in speaking of Mrs. Steel's behaviour as you did just now, still I will not deny that my experience, even as an inmate in Mr. Steel's family, is a warning against ever being tempted even by the most brilliant offers to again wittingly place myself in a false position in life. Therefore I repeat that even if Mr. Ravensmore were to give me the chance—which I tell you with perfect truth I do not think he is in the least likely to do" ("again" she perhaps mentally added, for the satisfaction of her own conscience), "I should not dream of accepting him, even though I cared for him. And what is more—though you have no vestige of a shadow of a right to be told so—I *don't* care for him."

"Is that true?" asked Shafto, still incredulous, but with a bounding heart, and a face all on a sudden marvellously brightened up. "But you have been flirting with him desperately, Miss Hawthorn—Grace."

"Pooh!" answered Grace. "Mr. Ravensmore is a young gentleman who *must* have amusement of that kind provided for him, or he would not think he was hospitably entertained. Bella, of course, ought to have provided it for him, but she would not. So I suppose it fell to my lot to support the credit of the house."

"Dutiful, certainly," growled Shafto, the light of his countenance being considerably "turned down" as suddenly as it had flared up. "You didn't think the duty a dangerous one, of course?"

"No, why should I?"

"O, only that when hearts and suchlike articles of value are made playthings of to amuse one's guests, they sometimes—get lost."

"Ah, but you see mine was safely locked up. I put it away a long, long time ago, and gave somebody else the key to keep."

"How long ago?"

"I am such a bad hand at counting," said Grace, commencing the task of numeration in due form on a hand which no mortal man could have seen held up for the purpose without feeling an irresistible impulse to seize and kiss it. "Let me see—one, two—well, it was last June—O! I see the savage boar *can* climb, after all! Mr. Shafto! for mercy's sake! You'll have the whole thing down. Don't—don't! Let me go, Mr. Shafto, or I will throw myself down!"

"Say 'let me go, *Jack*,' and I will."

"*Do* let me go, I say—*Jack!* There! for goodness' sake! There's somebody peeping from behind that bush; it's that odious Captain Baytree."

In describing Miss Hawthorn sitting on the *machâm* at the beginning of this chapter, I was careful to state that I sketched from fancy. Having seen the young lady in other situations, I was able to picture to myself how she must have looked in that particular one; that was all. For when the above-recorded conversation was related to me, nothing was told me but the bare dialogue, without any descriptive comment. I am therefore quite unable to explain what particular occurrence may have given occasion for the disjointed and apparently inconsecutive ejaculations of which the last three speeches are made up. The only light I can throw on the matter is suggested by Grace's allusion to Captain Baytree. We know, from what that officer told Mrs. Steel, that at the time when he approached Miss Hawthorn's and Shafto's *machâm*, Shafto was no longer standing below, but the pair were, in the Deputy-Commissioner's own touching phrase, "billing and cooing like a couple of turtle-doves on a twig." Something then—though *what* there is nothing to show—had evidently induced Mr. Shafto to at last accept the invitation, which he had at first so rudely rejected, to take his place by Miss Hawthorn's side.

Meanwhile the drive had been going on. The solemn stillness of the jungle, which had hitherto been rather deepened than broken by the constant cooing of wood-pigeons (real ones, not the human imitation) and the occasional cheery pipe of the gray partridge, now began to be disturbed by the unwonted hubbub of tom-toms. Then, as the line of beaters slowly advanced through the dense cover, distant sounds of shouting were borne along on the light breeze. Presently a black partridge, which had been persistently repeating his quaint, croaking call for the last half-hour, close to the further edge of the river-bed, suddenly rose with a startling whir-r-r, and flew back towards the beaters, just skimming the tops of the bushes. Shortly afterwards a pair of gleaming little eyes peered out through a brake just opposite Grace's *machâm*, and after a time, shocked perhaps with what they saw going on there, withdrew again as the wild cat which owned them turned about and followed the partridge which it had disturbed. Then with stealthy pace, sharp noses stretched out before and bushy tails trailing behind, a couple of jackals slipped down the bank and trotted across the sand. But of all these sights and sounds my belief is that Shafto and Grace took no heed whatever; though the former, as a good and keen sportsman, should have known that they were distinct signals to "make ready." The consequence was that when at length they were aroused to a sense of where they were, and what they had come there for, by the bang-bang of both barrels of a gun at the other end of the line, they were so unprepared that when a gazelle buck (which, by the way, had been loitering about close to the verge of the jungle opposite to their *machâm*, and might have been shot half a dozen times over within the last five minutes) bounded across the open space right before them, they were quite taken aback. And while Shafto fumbled with his rifle to get a cartridge in, the graceful creature gaily vanished again amongst the bushes, wagging his little tail as if in derision.

"O, how beautiful!" exclaimed Grace in rapture.

"Confound the brute!" ejaculated Shafto in disgust. "Well, I only hope no more are coming to bother us," continued that eager sportsman, lowering the weapon which he had raised to his shoulder all too late.

The gods heard his prayer; for nothing more came their way except an old sow, with a family of piglings, who trotted away right under their *machâm*, grunting scornful disapproval either of the unsportsmanlike carelessness with which he left his rifle resting across the corner of the seat, or perhaps of the very close proximity of his Tam-o'-Shanter bonnet to the little gray wide-awake hat of his companion.

After the drive was over, the whole party gathered together in the river-bed, and the usual comparison of notes was gone through, with something less, however, than the usual eager, breathless chatter. Indeed it is remarkable, that although several of them had made capital hits, and some others woful misses, these hits and misses were just the subjects on which all remained equally silent. Thus Rattley Trapton said nothing about a promise he had exacted from Bella, which filled his mind with scarcely repressible exultation. Nor did Shafto proclaim that Grace Hawthorn had consented to be his wife. On the other hand, Mrs. Steel did not mention her futile attempt to surprise Grace in her treacherous intercourse with Ravensmore, and Captain Baytree and Trapton also discreetly refrained from any allusion to the same episode. The Commissioner, who had had an opportunity for a few words of explanation with his wife, was just about to commence the disagreeable but necessary duty of giving Trapton a hint that his further company was not desired, when, much to his relief, the gallant hussar himself took leave with such a modest but manly apology for his intrusion (again carefully laying stress on the circumstance that he had had no idea that the ladies were to be of the party), that Mr. Steel was for the moment staggered. It is even possible that through his natural impulse of courtesy and hospitality he might have been tricked into giving an invitation to the unwelcome guest to remain, had not Mrs. Steel prevented any such exhibition of weakness by promptly accepting the gallant Rattley's adieux, and hurrying him off. Her feminine instinct somehow told her that the cavalier's unlooked-for readiness to depart, without (so far as she knew) having been able so much as to exchange a word with her daughter, was not the least of the many unsatisfactory circumstances connected with his visit.

So Trapton was allowed to start on his long ride back to Béshuckabad without being invited to break his fast, a function which the remainder of the party presently returned to their camp to discharge, Mrs. Steel putting an emphatic veto on the proposal of a second "drive," for which arrangements had been made a mile or so further on.

Mrs. Steel drove back in the "felonious" mule carriage without mishap; but the place of the bodily terror under which she had suffered in the morning was taken by scarcely less painful mental disquietude. The more she thought of it, the more convinced she felt that there had been something that had not met even her keen eye between the obnoxious and wily Trapton's unlooked-for appearance and equally unlooked-for departure. Then this disarrangement of their plans, owing to the sickness at Gurhi Moofsid, was most disastrous. Unless Grace could be got out of the way, all her scheming must end in defeat and disappointment. So when she took her place at the breakfast-table, it was with a moody brow.

But the breakfast had been provided by the Nawab, and a chief feature in a Nawab's breakfast to English guests is champagne. After her untold exertions and ineffable harassments, both of mind and body, a matron of Mrs. Steel's mature years was unquestionably justified in taking a glass or two of that exhilarating beverage, notwithstanding the still somewhat early hour of the day. She did so, and not without a sufficiently perceptible effect upon her spirits and humour. Towards the end of the meal she grew quite lively, and overflowed with good-natured banter, which she distributed freely amongst the whole party, but bestowed with especial abundance on Shafto and Grace Hawthorn.

These two young persons had not yet divulged their little secret to any one but themselves. And though Baytree may possibly have drawn inferences in his own mind from what he had happened to see, he was not as yet sufficiently acquainted with Mr. Steel's views in regard to his ward, to be able to conjecture whether an account of what he had witnessed would be likely to be agreeable or otherwise to that gentleman. He had therefore wisely resolved to hold his peace. Grace wished herself to be the first to announce her engagement to her benefactor, and ask his sanction to it; and she did not wish to do this until the turmoil of the day was over, and she could secure a quiet half-hour in which to make the momentous communication.

But though Grace and Shafto seemed to have little to say to each other in presence of the rest, Mrs. Steel thought she observed something in their demeanour which encouraged her hopes that the young police-officer might prove the *deus ex machinâ* to relieve her from her present embarrassments. She caught Grace signalling deprecating and reassuring messages to Shafto, while Ravensmore (who apparently had got over his rebuff of a few days before) continued to press his attentions on her. And this idea helped on the work of the champagne, and rendered her still more benignly disposed towards all in general, and Shafto and Miss Hawthorn in particular.

But surely this devoted lady must have been delivered over, "for that day only," to the very arch-fiend of ill-luck, with license to work his malevolent will with her without let or hindrance. If he had triumphed in her suspicion and ill-humour, he was destined to extract even more pernicious results from her unwonted good temper and openness of heart.

In the course of the afternoon she contrived to have a conversation with Shafto apart, while the others were all occupied in some way elsewhere. That the Commissioner's haughty dame should condescend to speak in private to a person so low in the official scale as an assistant-superintendent of police would have created the greatest wonder in Béshuckabad, where subalterns and captains and suchlike might think themselves favoured if they occasionally had the sweeping semicircles of homage, which they caused their hats to describe when they met Mrs. Steel in public, acknowledged by a declension of about an eighth of a degree of her stately neck. But at Diknugger the case was quite different. There all the residents were the Commissioner's subordinates, and consequently, in her view, her own private serfs; whereas at Béshuckabad, the majority, being regimental officers, owed no official allegiance to the civil power, and it was therefore necessary for Mrs. Steel to maintain her dignity very rigidly, lest haply she might otherwise sink in social estimation below some ambitious and presuming general's wife. In the same way, one sometimes hears of ladies even of the most august rank, who would consider that they derogated from their high place by condescending further than to walk through a quadrille with a prince of the blood at a state ceremony, entering into all the gaiety of the evening, and dancing reels with the footmen at their own servants' ball. So Mrs. Steel was accustomed to unbend affably when she visited the little purely civil stations within her husband's division, and Shafto was therefore not particularly surprised at finding himself admitted to the honour of a *tête-à-tête* with her.

She talked to him most kindly; inquired about his prospects of promotion; gave him good advice, urged him to be steady and work hard, above all things warned him against being led away by the evil example of his chief, Colonel Catçheside, on that most disastrous of courses, the racecourse; and finally assured him that if he did, and did not, respectively, do all these things, he would find a warm friend in the Commissioner, who never failed to use his best exertions to forward the prospects of deserving young men who served under him. From maternal exhortations to steadiness the transition was easy and natural to the desirability of early and suitable marriage. This subject she approached with an outward air of semi-jocularity, underlaid, however, by an evident seriousness and kindliness of intention, which she judged would be peculiarly calculated to win the confidence of a young man, whose fancy had perchance already "lightly turned" towards the same direction in which she wished to lead him further. And then, on the principle enforced by that most pertinent question which concludes the immortal ballad of Jack Horner, talking of marriage in the abstract necessarily suggested some hints regarding marriageable girls in the concrete.

"There are few better or more lovable girls to be met with than Grace Hawthorn," she continued. "You can judge of her looks (as, no doubt, you are a connoisseur), which, though having no pretensions to regular beauty, are far from plain. But of course you have no such opportunities as I have of recognising the sterling worth and sweetness of her character. Let me tell you, Mr. Shafto, that the man will be by no means an unlucky one who gets Miss Hawthorn for a wife, and"—she added, in a sly, confidential way, and with such a wonderful contortion, designed to make her pompous face look knowing, as nearly set Shafto off into a fit of laughter—"Mr. Steel, mind you, is not a person to do a generous action by halves. Having chosen to undertake the charge of Miss Hawthorn, he will not leave his work of benevolence incomplete, you may be sure. In a word, the young man who wins Grace Hawthorn's hand will not find it empty. She will have a few thousand rupees, which, I have no doubt, will not be an unwelcome addition to the resources of a steady and prudent young fellow, who has his own way to make in life."

Mrs. Steel, keenly watching her auditor's face as she spoke, may perhaps have thought that the deep blush which overspread it was a signal of the success of her delicately-conveyed suggestion. If so, she was never more mistaken in her life.

"Indeed!" remarked Shafto dryly. "That will be a very comfortable little addition to Mr. Ravensmore's pay, which is not bad as it is."

"Mr. Ravensmore! What are you talking about?" exclaimed Mrs. Steel angrily. "How dare you connect Mr. Ravensmore's name with—" And then interrupting herself and smothering her indignation, she went on, with forced good-humour, "O Mr. Shafto! of course I have seen what you mean. But brilliant young men like Mr. Ravensmore *will* have their little flirtations, just out of vanity. Bless you! they mean nothing by it, and Grace is far too sensible a girl not to know that. But young ladies, Mr. Shafto, are not always such guileless creatures as you young men think them; and they may sometimes give encouragement to such attentions as Mr. Ravensmore's, knowing full well how little they mean, with quite a different purpose from any vain hope of captivating the person who pays them."

"And pray, what may that occult purpose be?" inquired Shafto.

"Why, of course," explained Mrs. Steel, with inexpressible slyness, "to stimulate the lagging addresses of *somebody else.*"

"Ah! and so you really think, Mrs. Steel," said Shafto, pointing through the door of the tent in which they sat to some of the rest of the party, who had just appeared in sight round the corner of a sugar-cane field, on returning from their afternoon stroll, "you think that Miss Hawthorn has come just far enough for us to catch sight of her side by side with Mr. Ravensmore, and is now with pretty prudishness waiting for Mr. Steel and the others, whom they seem to have left some way behind, to come up, all on purpose—to stimulate my lagging addresses. Well, Mrs.

Steel, I accept your frank hints in the spirit in which they are offered, and am really *very much* obliged to you."

He then left the tent, and walked across to his own, without waiting for Grace and Ravensmore, who had now been overtaken by Mr. Steel, his daughter, and the Baytrees.

Now, many a young fellow in Shafto's situation would have thought Mrs. Steel's lecture, the laborious cunning with which she strove to prepare the ground for the seed of that crop which (had she only known it) had already been sown and reaped, and especially the gentle censure passed on his laggardliness, all a capital joke; would have laughed consumedly in his sleeve in the first instance, and then hastened to impart the jest to the other person for whom it was likely to have so peculiarly delicious a flavour. But such, I am sorry to say, was not the way of my dear friend John Shafto. He was a right good fellow, as my readers, I hope, will adjudge him to be, when they close this book. But he was possessed of certain troublesome little devils, and one of these was the demon of distrust, and this mischievous imp now kept whispering in his ear, and would not be silenced by all the angry expostulations of his better feelings. "How strange that Mrs. Steel's virtual offer of Grace's hand and dower should be simultaneous with Grace's own sudden change of behaviour towards him! A cynic might suspect that there had been un understanding between the two ladies; and that Mrs. Steel's proffered 'few thousand rupees' had, before being made to serve as an inducement to him to propose for Grace, been employed as a bribe to buy Grace herself off Ravensmore." "No, no!" he answered to the injurious suggestion. "Perish the disloyal, the unworthy thought! But O! that low-minded beast of an old woman—that she-devil, with her insolent offers and her disgusting attempts at vulgar cajolery—I should like to wring her fat neck round. And that confounded puppy Ravensmore, too. But there must be no more nonsense with regard to him. Grace knows perfectly well how to put a stop to assiduities that are not wanted.

Faith! I have had a pretty good proof of her ability in that way in my own experience. Why should she have walked alone with the fellow again this afternoon? I strongly suspect she did not think she was in sight of the drawing-room tent when she stopped for the others to come up. Bah! what a suspi— Hullo! what the deuce do you want?"

The not over-polite inquiry which thus brought our Falkland's self-tormenting cogitations to an abrupt end was addressed to no less a person than Captain Baytree, who had followed him and touched him on the shoulder.

"This boisterous, disrespectful manner of addressing your official superiors," remarked the Deputy-Commissioner severely, "is most unbecoming, Mr. Shafto."

"If you choose to make your official communications," answered Shafto impatiently, "by coming behind a man and clapping him on the back, you must not quarrel with the words you knock out by so doing, which are pretty sure to be those that happen to be uppermost."

"Well, I warn you that I shall have to take notice of this insubordinate habit, if you persist in it. But I have no time for that now. You are to get on your horse at once, and ride, as hard as you can, to Gurhi Moofsid. That meddling, mischief-making fellow Brandling has been interfering with the police—assaulting them, for aught I know, in the discharge of their duty, and rescuing a prisoner—that unhanged scamp of a nephew of Kumbukt Khan—after he had been caught red-handed committing burglary and dacoity. Come, get ready, and be off sharp, for Heaven knows what other confounded pranks he may be playing."

"That is old Brandling all over!" remarked Shafto. "But there would be no use my starting to-night. If Budmash Khan has been rescued, you may be sure he is over the hills and far away by this time."

"I tell you, you are to start now," said Baytree.

"That is absurd," replied the insubordinate Shafto. "The road from here to Gurhi Moofsid is bad enough to ride by day; it would be impossible to go beyond a foot-pace in the dark. I shall be there quite as soon if I start to-morrow."

"Shall I go and inform the Commissioner, then, that you refuse to go—refuse to obey my positive orders?" asked Baytree, very irate.

"How do you know about this?" counter-questioned Shafto.

"Colonel Catcheside got the news by a messenger from the Thanadar of Gurhi an hour ago, and has just ridden out here with it. He is now speaking with the Commissioner."

"Then why can't Catcheside go? In an important matter like this, surely the superintendent himself ought to go. Why don't you send him?"

"Never mind. It is sufficient that it is my order that you are to go."

Whether love or duty would finally have prevailed, and whether Shafto would have persisted in his mutinous opposition to Baytree's order, had those two been left to carry out the dispute by themselves, it would perhaps be rash to conjecture. But just then Mr. Steel, followed by Catcheside, came up to them; and it then appeared that though Baytree, in conformity with his undeviating rule of seizing every means of self-assertion, had made out that it was only *his* caprice which he insisted on Shafto obeying, he was really only obeying an order which he himself had received from Mr. Steel. In fact, the Commissioner, whose boundless reverence for law and authority was terribly scandalised at the reported proceedings of this uncovenanted apothecary, had not much faith either in Colonel Catcheside's judgment or his strength of will. He had therefore expressly desired that the Colonel's assistant should go and take the matter up, instead of the Colonel himself.

Shafto had now therefore no choice but to obey the order to depart, though his free spirit chafed at Baytree's peremptory tone, and he was particularly loth to leave a clear field for Ravensmore. But it was hardly on the afternoon of the very morning on which he had invited an interesting young woman to share his future fortunes that he could afford to quarrel with his bread and butter. So with a very bad grace he ordered his horse to be saddled, and prepared for a moonlight ride.

He was not even able to wish his lady-love good-bye. She, along with the other female members of the party, had retired to dress for dinner. And as Mr. Steel now joined Baytree in pressing him to make haste and start, even a half-hour's delay was impossible. So, scribbling a line of explanation and adieu to Grace, he mounted and rode sulkily away, uncheered even by a glance of her eye or a squeeze of her hand.

CHAPTER XV.

DR. BRANDLING'S ESCAPADES.

NOTWITHSTANDING the darkness of the night and the badness of the road, Shafto managed to get along at something better than a foot-pace. Half-way he got a change of horses, mounting that belonging to the Thanadar, or deputy-inspector of a police-station which he had to pass. Nevertheless, by the time he reached his journey's end, the first light of dawn was just breaking, and dimly revealing above the dark mass of jungle, through which his path lay, the bare and rugged outline of what could scarcely be dignified by the name of a range of hills, but rather of a stretch of broken ground, which rose before him. Standing out from this, dark and grim against the gray sky, was a massive brick round tower, flanking which he could just trace, and partly distinguish in the twilight from the natural inequalities of the horizon, the jagged line of a weather-breached earthen rampart. This was the old fort, or robber's den, of Gurhi Moofsid.

As Shafto rode up to the tower, early as the hour was, he found many people moving about. The cattle and goats, of which patriarchal commodities the wealth (such as remained) of Kumbukt Khan and his tribesmen consisted, were being brought out from the ramshackle ranges of outhouses which surrounded the tower, and from the still more squalid hovels of the wretched hamlet hard by. The men whom he met were ill-clad and dirty in the extreme, and had generally a lean and hungry look. But they were striking figures. Nearly all tall, well made, upright, and stately, with a bold, almost defiant, but withal melancholy, expression in the dark eyes which flashed out from behind the parted curtains of their long and tangled locks, they seemed to have, like the Crimean Tartars described by Kinglake, "something of the forlorn majesty of peasants descended from warriors."

On Shafto's unexpected arrival becoming known, there was great bustle. A bed was brought out for him, upon which he promptly threw his long and brawny limbs with a force that made its poor timbers groan audibly. A frothing bowl of fresh milk was next presented, which simple refreshment also he did by no means reject. Then a couple of sturdy fellows set to work to shampoo him, an operation, however ridiculous to witness, by no means unpleasant to suffer after fifty miles of jogging in the dark over villanous roads. And lastly, the owner of the tower, old Kumbukt Khan, came hobbling down the slope from its gateway to greet him, tying the waistband of his pyjamas as he came, his polite eagerness to pay his respects to the "Sahib" not yet having suffered him to complete his hurried toilet inside.

From him Shafto learnt the particulars of Dr. Brandling's audacious interference with the course of justice—as viewed from the Moofsid standpoint. He had already heard from the officer in charge of the police-station, at which he had changed horses, the account of the affair as it appeared to the police—or (not to make a rash statement), at any rate, as the police desired that it should appear to their superior officers. Putting the two statements together, Shafto, who was a shrewd fellow, capable of seeing into a millstone as far as most men of his years, came to the conclusion that the truth of the story was this:

There was great scarcity, something not far short of famine, in this remote and isolated part of the district. He, as well as everybody else in Diknugger, was fully aware of this. But it did not suit Captain Baytree to be bothered by a famine which would necessarily divert into this unattractive region—where inspections of lieutenant-governors, and even of commissioners, were more rare than angels' visits—all the available funds of the district, which were now being so usefully employed to the amelioration of the public, the benefit of the State, and the glory of Captain Baytree, on showy works in and about the Civil Station. So, nothing being done by their rulers to help the hungry Moofsids and their starving cattle, the Moofsids had nothing for it but to do as it must be confessed they were at all times ready enough to do—that is, to help themselves to their neighbours' stores. Burglaries, committed by gangs of these denizens of the jungle in the towns and villages of the more fertile portions of the district, had been growing of late more and more frequent, but they had hitherto been of a petty kind. Now, however, a depredation on a larger and more organised scale had been committed.

The Nawab possessed a considerable property in the immediate neighbourhood of Gurhi Moofsid. It had been the most cherished object of his father, the far-seeing Lomri Khan's policy to oust Kumbukt Khan and his family altogether off the face of the earth. As long as they had a local habitation and a name, however shrunken and diminished, at Gurhi Moofsid, he believed that there would always be danger of their rising again on the wave of one of those revolutions which have been so frequent in Indian history, and swamping him and his new-built prosperity. He had therefore by insidious loans, mortgages, and distraints striven for years, and with no little success, to acquire all the land he possibly could in the country which still owned his rival's influence.

The Nawab's factor on his Gurhi Moofsid estate was a bunniah—a Hindu money-lender—named Cheetun Shah. This man, perceiving that the scarcity was likely to grow more and more severe, and that the price of food would accordingly get higher and higher, did what a certain other factor of a great estate had done many thousand years before—he laid up a great store of wheat in his barns, which he did not propose to produce until all the other supplies of the neighbourhood should be exhausted. But this benevolent design of his, got wind, and his short-sighted and ungrateful neighbours perversely thought more of the present pinch, which their stomachs felt, than of the future comfort of having them filled from the provident factor's garners when the time should arrive for these to be unlocked—provided, of course, that they were able to fulfil the trifling condition of paying him at some eight times the normal rate. So a party of them—estimated by Cheetun Shah himself at from five to ten thousand, by the Thanadar at a hundred, and by Kumbukt Khan at half a dozen—broke into his house by night, carried off as much grain as they and the factor's own cattle, which they stole for the purpose, could carry, burnt the rest, gave the Shah himself by way of payment a skinful of sore bones, and departed to hide themselves in the ravines. While this was going on, the police, weighted by the consciousness of the importance of their services to the safety of the commonwealth, and unwilling to impair their power of performing these by having their heads or arms broken, maintained an attitude of vigilant observation. But as soon as the crowd dispersed, and left them free to take more active steps, they scoured the country in every direction (excepting only that in which the thieves had gone), and meeting young Budmash Khan, a nephew of the Gurhi Moofsid chief, who enjoyed a dreadful reputation for all manner of wickedness and vice, riding homewards during the small hours of the morning, when all well-behaved young gentlemen should have been in bed, they, in a most spirited manner, arrested him, and without difficulty had him identified as the ringleader of the raiders.

But while this process of identification was going on by the smoking ruins of the factor's barns, Dr. Brandling, who, as the reader knows, had gone to Gurhi Moofsid three days before, on hearing of the outbreak of fever in the neighbourhood, when he learnt what had taken place, suddenly put in an appearance, told Cheetun Shah that the destruction of his barns was no more than he deserved, and that it would have served him right had he been basted in the flames—roasting, though not an easy death, being no more painful, and very much less lingering, than that by starvation, which he had done his best to inflict upon his neighbours. Then addressing himself to the scandalised Thanadar, a portly and oleaginous bunniah of the Bumble description, he told him that the evidence he was trumping up against Budmash Khan was not worth a snap of his fingers. And finally, grasping his stout walking-stick with significant energy, and turning towards the two stalwart constables who, with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets, guarded the handcuffed criminal, he ordered them, in a voice which was not to be gainsaid, to set their captive free. The handcuffs were unlocked; and Budmash Khan, dashing through the crowd, made for the jungle with the swiftness of a hare. Dr. Brandling then set off to return to Gurhi Moofsid, evidently highly satisfied with his night's work. But first he strongly warned both Cheetun Shah and the Thanadar to amend their ways, otherwise he would not rest until he had the one sent to the treadmill for robbing the poor, and the other cashiered for perverting judgment.

Shafto had been greatly amused at the plaintive whine with which Cheetun Shah told his story of the doctor's proceedings, and the horrified indignation expressed in every tone, look, and gesture of the outraged Thanadar's voice, face, and limbs.

"The doctor is certainly a most arbitrary gentleman," he remarked in Hindustani. And then, as he pictured the scene, with Brandling's gaunt figure in the foreground, so like an illustration cut from a volume of *Don Quixote*, he burst into a roar of laughter, which all his auditors, the Thanadar, Cheetun Shah, and Kumbukt Khan, seemed equally (and I must add most properly) to regard as excessively indecent.

He did not find the lawless man of medicine himself at Gurhi Moofsid. He had gone to a large village five or six miles further on, where Shafto was told that the fever was now raging terribly. So after an hour's rest and a simple breakfast of chupatties, milk, and eggs, Shafto mounted again and pushed on thither. As he rode onwards, winding along the dry bottoms of dark ravines, or clambering over precipitous crags of treacherous earth, he began to see ghastly signs of the truth both of the famine and of the consequent epidemic, which Captain Baytree was so anxious to pooh-pooh. Numerous skeletons of cows and buffaloes lay at the bottoms of the ravines, the animals having apparently fallen from the scorched hillsides, on which they had in vain been searching for a few scanty blades of grass, from the sheer weakness of starvation. Then, as he turned round some projecting angle, he would come upon a huge flock of loathsome carrion birds, so heavily gorged on a half-devoured carcass that they could not fly away at his approach, but could only run a few paces aside, by the help of the flapping of their huge wings. But a still more horrid sight presently met his view—the corpse of a wretched woman, half naked, the skull partially stripped of flesh, and two lean parya dogs tugging and tearing at the limbs. With a sickening sensation, and no trace left of his late disposition to merriment, he pushed on at the best speed he could make, continuing to see and hear, in the few scattered hamlets of herdsmen's huts which he passed through, stronger and stronger confirmatory evidence of the virulence of the epidemic with which the unhappy district had been visited.

It is in no way essential to the story I have to tell to draw a painful picture of the scene of squalor, despair, suffering, and death in which Shafto found his friend Brandling hard at work. The latter was far too earnestly occupied to listen to inquiries about his rescue of Budmash Khan for some time. So leaving that subject to a more convenient season, Shafto set to work with hearty goodwill to help the doctor in his work. By their joint exertions, a makeshift hospital was run up at a little distance from the village. It consisted of nothing more than an awning of rough thatch and matting, supported on poles; but it was, at all events, well ventilated. Hither, by dint of their own bodily exertions and authority, the two Englishmen succeeded in the course of the day in removing the sick, who had hitherto lain in their own houses, spreading the infection through the village with frightful rapidity. Their efforts were energetically aided by the son of Kumbukt Khan, who had accompanied the doctor to the place. Dilawar Khan, such was his name, was a handsome young man of about thirty, of a superb figure. The expression of his countenance was sad and stern, according with the fallen fortunes of his house. There was, too, a fierce light in his eyes, and a wild energy often observable in his gestures and in his speech, which might have seemed only the signs of a high and untamed spirit contending with restraint and humiliation. But in fact they indicated more than this: poor Dilawar Khan was in truth more than half a maniac.

At length, late in the afternoon, fairly spent with their labours, Shafto and Brandling retired to a little tent, which the latter had had pitched for himself, to get necessary rest and food. Then Shafto took the opportunity of eliciting from the doctor his version of Budmash Khan's liberation. It differed scarcely at all from that given by the Thanadar. The impulsive doctor's proceedings had in fact been so high-handed and unwarrantable that it was scarcely possible for the fertile imagination of even a bunniah and a policeman to exaggerate them.

"By Jove, doctor," said Shafto, "this may turn out an awkward scrape for you! I wish you had not been so hasty."

"Hasty!" exclaimed Brandling, in a transport of excitement, the nostrils of his eagle beak distended, and his flashing gray eyes, deep in the sombre vaults of their shaggy brows, "in a fine frenzy rolling"—"hasty! Do you think, if it were to do again, and I had a week in which to balance the pros and cons, I would hesitate a moment, or depart a hair's breadth from what I have done? Why, Shafto, you at least have eyes to see and a heart to feel! Can you look upon the sights you have witnessed to-day—the helpless dead and dying in that shed yonder, the carcass of man and beast cast on the roadside to be meat for the fowls of heaven and the beasts of the earth? Can you see these unhappy people, overwhelmed at once by two of the sore judgments of God, the famine and the pestilence, and do you mean to say that, while you could lift a finger to prevent it, you would let them fall under a third, the rod of the oppressor, too? that you would leave them in the hands of a set of rascals that lay wait, that set snares, that set a trap to catch men, that overpass the deeds of the wicked, while they grind the faces of the poor?"

"Heaven knows," replied Shafto, "I sympathise with the poor devils too. And far be it from me to deny that the Thanadar may very probably have waxed fat and shone through substituting oppression for judgment. Nevertheless, I cannot but think you would have done well to be a little less precipitate. In the long-run you would probably have been able to do more real service for Budmash Khan, whom I certainly believe to have been unjustly accused in this case."

"Of course. And knowing that, would you have had me allow him to suffer the disgrace of being manacled by these tyrants a moment longer than necessary?"

Shafto shook his head. "Besides," he resumed, "this action of yours *after* the crime was perpetrated will give some colour to a hint that Cheetun Shah threw out that you had said something to instigate or encourage the attack on his house. Of course I, and all who know you, see the gross absurdity of such a charge. But unluckily Steel does *not* know you, or very little, and Baytree, who does, may notwithstanding be not unwilling to *pretend* some belief in the calumny."

Dr. Brandling looked as sheepish as it was possible for a man so thoroughly in earnest as he was to look.

"Of course I never instigated or encouraged the violence of these poor deluded and starving men," he said. But there was certainly less of vehemence in his denial than Shafto had expected. "It is true that when I heard a whisper of Cheetun Shah having all this store of grain accumulated, I upbraided him openly, and before a considerable number of people at Gurhi Moofsid, with his selfishness. And I believe that my so speaking was the first intimation that the villagers in general had that there was such a store in his granaries. At least he asserts this."

"Whe-e-ew!" was Shafto's inarticulate but emphatic comment.

"But if I was indiscreet," continued Brandling hastily, "in this particular—as I acknowledge that I may have been—I have done what in me lay to repair my wrong. I have given Cheetun Shah a bond for five thousand rupees in compensation for the loss he has suffered."

"Five thousand rupees!" ejaculated Shafto in astonishment. "The whole damage the fellow has suffered would not amount to fifteen hundred at the most liberal computation. Really, doctor, this must be seen to. You must not be allowed to be looted in this manner."

"Well, well," replied Brandling, with some signs of impatience, "if he has been injured through my indiscretion, it is only fair that I should repay, and we must not look too closely to the precise value of the property destroyed. You must remember that the man has been beaten too—not but what he richly deserved it."

"Repay! That is all very well. But not to the tune of five thousand rupees. Forgive me, doctor, but neither you nor I draw the pay of lieutenant-governors, nor even of our friend Mr. Steel. 'Twill take a long time to make up five thousand rupees and interest at twelve per cent from the superabundance of a salary of three fifty a month."

Chivalrous persons with a sublime disregard of the sordid considerations connected with pounds, shillings, and pence are by no means the least sensitive to any allusion to the narrowness of their incomes. Dr. Brandling evidently resented Shafto's last observation as an impertinence.

"I can manage my own money matters without assistance, sir," he said very haughtily.

"O, certainly!" replied Shafto. "I apologise. But now I must be off, or it will be dark before I get back to Gurhi Moofsid."

He rose, and the doctor did so too, and laid his brown bony hand on the young man's shoulder.

"It is I who should apologise, Shafto," he said frankly. "But never talk to a poor man about prudence; it is only the rich to whom it is safe to recommend that virtue. Yes, you had better start; it is a bad road for moonlight. And I too must get back to my patients; we have wasted too much time as it is in talk."

On the following day Shafto set out on the wild-goose chase, which his friend's eccentric proceedings had procured him, after the fugitive Budmash Khan. And two days later, as had been arranged even before the burglary had occurred, the Commissioner, attended by Captain Baytree, arrived, and encamped at Gurhi Moofsid.

Dr. Brandling, who was still hard at work in his fever hospital at the village where Shafto had left him, was summoned to give an account of his misdemeanours to these two magisterial dignitaries.

He vindicated his action before them by much the same argument, and as much impassioned fervour, as he had used to Shafto. Baytree exhibited unmitigated disgust, and was especially severe on certain passages in the doctor's defence in which his phraseology seemed to be borrowed from the Hebrew prophets. This Captain Baytree emphatically declared to be not only blasphemous, but *almost* disrespectful. Mr. Steel liked neither the defendant nor his style of defence any better than his deputy did. He was somewhat of a formalist, and a great stickler for subordination and rigid legality; and this presumptuous, meddling, blustering apothecary was a person who seemed expressly fashioned by nature for the purpose of jarring against his strongest prejudices. Yet, with all this, the man's pluck extorted his unwilling admiration. Mr. Steel was accustomed to the utmost deference from officials of the highest standing. There was not a single deputy-commissioner in the Mâ Bâp Provinces who, if he had the misfortune to incur a reproof from him, would dream of such reckless audacity as to offer a reply. Even Sir Duncan MacTullub, on some occasions in which Mr. Steel had deemed it his duty to point out certain errors in the procedure of his government, had never ventured to defend himself further than by saying that the act criticised was Wiggins', his secretary's, doing, not his. But here was an uncovenanted apothecary on three hundred and fifty a month, who had been taken through the charity of some benevolent official, when already an elderly man, from the rank and file of the army, or from before the mast of a merchant ship (the Commissioner did not exactly remember which), and given this appointment as a provision for his old age—whom Baytree, by merely taking the trouble to write an unfavourable report, and Steel himself, by a scratch of his pen or a word from his lips, could have dismissed and cast penniless on the world—here was this man pertinaciously declaring that in rescuing a burglar and assaulting the police, he had only done what it would have been mean and dastardly in any one not to do, and denouncing directly the myrmidons of the law whom he had ill-treated, and by strong implication those more exalted officials who had taken up their cause, as oppressors whose houses are filled with the spoils of the poor.

"Come, Mr. Brandling," said the Commissioner at last, "I think we have had quite enough of this. If you really cannot see how reprehensible your conduct has been, I only regret it on your own account; as I fear that if such is your mode of regulating your actions, and such your overweening confidence in your own opinion of what is right and wrong, your retention in the public service must sooner or later become impossible. But as to the present case, there is no occasion for further argument. I will pass over what has been done, but I will take care that you do no more mischief. You will therefore be good enough to return at once to your proper duties at Diknugger."

"Return? Impossible, sir," replied Brandling.

Mr. Steel's eyes flashed, and a drawing in of the lips might have warned any one, who was acquainted with the system of storm-signals in use in the Commissioner's countenance, that there was danger brewing in the air. Perhaps Brandling observed this, for he went on to say, "Don't misunderstand me. I have no desire to dispute your authority, and if you insist on my going, I must obey. What I mean is, that it is impossible to leave this place, with a frightful epidemic of typhus raging, without any medical aid. I have only a native hospital assistant, who has already quite lost his head, and would be simply useless if left alone."

"You forget, Brandling," said Baytree, in a jeering tone, "that though Mr. Steel may not have your profound mastery of medical science, he has got eyes and ears. I think, sir, we saw no more outward and visible signs of Mr. Brandling's (I suppose, inward and spiritual) epidemic, than we did of his doubtless equally real but assuredly equally occult famine."

"There were certainly," assented Mr. Steel, "few or none of either."

"Then the local officials," blurted out Brandling, "must have taken great pains to keep them out of sight. Why, as you passed through the vast grazing grounds, did you not see that they were bare of grass?"

"Because the cattle had eaten it," said Baytree.

"What cattle? How many herds of cattle did you meet by the way?"

"I did remark," put in Mr. Steel, "that we saw hardly any cattle as we came along."

"O," replied Baytree, with a laugh, "our honest graziers in these parts have so much practice in concealing cattle which *don't* belong to them, that they have little difficulty, when it serves their turn, in hiding those which do. The jungle is wide. They knew we were coming; and I have no doubt we shall have a deputation from my old friends the Moofsids, before long, begging to be let off their taxes on the ground that all their stock has perished, and appealing to the evidence of our own senses just as Mr. Brandling has done, in proof of the latter assertion. The wily Moofsid is not the man I take him for if he fails to grasp the other broad hints which our medical friend here has been dropping for his edification, as readily as he did that particular one about the contents of poor Cheetun Shah's barns."

"You are not practised," said the Commissioner, addressing Brandling, "in judging the appearances of scarcity. But in the other matter you should speak with the authority of an expert. Tell me, without rhetoric or exaggeration, what is the extent of the disease? It is certainly remarkable that the headmen and village constables, whom we questioned as we came along, appeared to be very unconcerned about it."

"They may have been tutored by the Tahsildar," said Brandling sturdily; "for even in some of the villages which you passed the mortality has been frightful. But it is beyond Gurhi Moofsid that it is worst. There are villages there which are being literally decimated, to which the appalling expression of Scripture, that the carcasses of men are cast as dung upon the fields, may be applied literally and not as a mere figure of speech."

"Ha, ha! there is some comfort at any rate in that," laughed Baytree. "One of your evils will go a great way to cure the other, then. There should be a fine crop next harvest on fields that have been so well manured." And then, seeing that Mr. Steel frowned at this levity, he continued seriously, "Believe me, sir, that my information about the condition of this part of my district is, to say the least, as good as Mr. Brandling's. And to you, Brandling, all I have to say is this—I know you find the drudgery of your daily work at the station irksome. You have led an unsettled life, and have not acquired habits of steady application; so that is only natural. I know, too, that you are fond of a little outing, and also of earning a little travelling allowance. I am always ready to give you considerable liberty. But let Mr. Steel's words be a warning to you not to try my good-nature too far. And, to cut this matter short, you will, as Mr. Steel has already ordered, return at once to Diknugger. You can go back to your camp now; but mind, you must not be later than to-morrow afternoon in setting off on your way home."

Brandling made no reply, excepting by a look of ineffable scorn which he hurled at the speaker during that part of his address which referred to desire of outings and of travelling allowances. And longing to be back again amongst the poor wretches whom he had left in his mat-roofed hospital, he eagerly availed himself of the permission to depart.

"A dangerous man," remarked the Commissioner, when he had left the tent. "I feel by no means sure that his eccentricity of manner, and that air of bluntness and enthusiasm which he assumes, is not a mere cloak to cover a very shrewd and practical faculty for looking after his own interests. He has far too sharp a face to be really the ass which his words and actions would imply. I should like to know whether old Kumbukt Khan induced him to rescue his nephew by merely working on his benevolent feelings or by a more substantial appeal. I must say I have seldom come across a man whom I felt disposed from the first time I saw him more profoundly to mistrust."

Captain Baytree slept the sleep of the just that night, and continued to do so somewhat further than usual into the morning hours of the following day. He had nothing to cause him disquietude. The Tahsildar and his assistants had done their duty well, and no disagreeable sights or sounds had been permitted to offend the Commissioner's senses. And he had found a most unexpected and powerful aid, in his laudable endeavours to make things seem prosperous, in the violent prejudice which Mr. Steel had conceived against the insolent, blustering bearing of Dr. Brandling. So Captain Baytree slept sound and long, and after he awoke, dawdled leisurely over his morning coffee and toast, and then over his toilet. But when he came out of his tent and asked whether the Commissioner was up, he was startled to learn that Mr. Steel had started three hours before to visit the village where the doctor had established his fever hospital.

Dilawar Khan, the old Moofsid chief's son, guided the Commissioner along the winding and broken road. The worst sights which Shafto had encountered by the wayside a few days before had disappeared, Shafto himself having had them removed for reasons both of decency and sanitation. But Dilawar Khan took Mr. Steel into several of the hamlets near which they passed—wretched clusters of hovels, more like an encampment of Indian wigwams than a village in a settled and civilised land—and easily showed him convincing evidences of the existence and virulence of the sickness. He was greatly shocked. His wrath against Baytree was kindled not a little; but with less justice he also vented his anger on his guide. Why had not he and his father put the real state of matters before him in plain terms? Dilawar Khan's answer was rather clinching than satisfactory.

"What was the good, Sahib? It is God's will. Allah is merciful, and has sent us this sickness to relieve us from our misery. Our cattle have all died of hunger, and we must soon perish by starvation too, for we have no food. Our enemies have got possession of our lands; usurers have devoured our substance; the Government is flaying the skin off our flesh for its dues, and is casting us into prison for the offences of our despair. What other hope of escape from all this have we but in the fever and death?"

The sight which met Mr. Steel's eye as he dismounted and entered the little booth which constituted the doctor's extempore hospital was a terrible one. But there is no need to describe it. Suffice it to say, that it was so overcrowded that there was scarcely room to move about among the patients—several of whom were indeed patients no longer for any practitioner but the grave-digger—and numbers of sick, who had been brought in from neighbouring villages, lay on beds, or on the bare ground around, without shelter. In the midst of this stricken and helpless crowd, the tall, gaunt figure of Brandling seemed almost alone endowed with life and energy. In fact, the terror of the plague had now become so great, and the despair of the survivors so stunning, that scarce a man could be found to lend the Englishman any help. A native hospital assistant, half-stupefied with fatigue and horror, moved about in an objectless manner, and seemed to be rather in the way than of any service, and one or two villagers sat in a corner apathetically watching the doctor's proceedings.

Brandling himself presented a ghastly appearance. He was stripped to his riding-breeches and shirt, and the sleeves of the latter were rolled up to his shoulders. Though the morning air was cold and biting, and the ragged matting of the tent afforded little or no shelter from the wind, the perspiration had soaked his shirt through and through, was streaming from his forehead, and falling in heavy drops from his straggling beard on to the thin covering of the wretched creatures over whom he stooped. He had been called away by the summons of the Commissioner at noon the day before, and on his return from Gurhi Moofsid had found matters so bad as to put all thought of wasting time in taking food or rest quite out of the question, so he had not tasted a morsel for some twenty-four hours. As for sleep, he had certainly not had a wink for two nights. And all this time the strain of mind and body had been intense and incessant. It was not surprising, therefore, that his face should look shockingly haggard, or that a gleam of unnatural excitement should flash from his gray eyes.

Mr. Steel paused for a moment on the threshold of the shed, aghast at the spectacle before him. Just then some sudden emergency occurred in the case which the doctor was attending to at the time.

"Here! you, Jaláb Singh! come quick," he called out to the hospital assistant. But Jaláb Singh was quite dazed, and did not respond to the call. So Brandling, turning from the patient, dashed towards the box where his medicines were. He had a cup or a basin, or some such implement of his trade, in his hand, and seeing Mr. Steel standing there, he thrust it into his hands, saying, "Here! catch hold — sharp!" The Commissioner mechanically obeyed, and stood with the vessel in his hand, not looking very dignified, while Brandling, taking no further notice of him, being in fact probably unconscious of his presence, continued to busy himself with his work.

For nearly three hours Mr. Steel watched the indefatigable doctor, without venturing to interrupt him. He gave what help he could with his own hands, but was of more use still by exerting his influence to arouse the people from their apathy. Then a native doctor whom Baytree, by the Commissioner's desire, had ordered up from the nearest Government Dispensary, for the purpose of being sent about amongst the villages to report whether there really was any truth in Dr. Brandling's alarming reports, turned up. His arrival gave Brandling a little much-needed respite, and drawing his brawny bare arm across his dripping forehead (leaving a great smear of dust on it as he did so), he walked out into the open air. The Commissioner followed him.

"Mr. Brandling," he said; and it is probable that he intended to speak some word of encomium of the devoted labours which he had been witnessing; but as the doctor turned abruptly round, there was (so it seemed to Mr. Steel) such a defiant, insolent expression in his face, that for the life of him he could not bring himself to utter the intended words of praise. And indeed, after what had passed in their interview the preceding day, I think it very likely that Brandling's countenance really did not exhibit any extraordinary signs of joy at the Commissioner's arrival. Then his temper, it must be remembered, had been rendered irritable by long toil, anxiety, and want of food and sleep. And it is very likely that he felt much as Hotspur did,

> "When he was dry with rage and extreme toil,
> Breathless and faint, leaning upon his sword;"

and

> "Came there a certain lord, neat and trimly dressed,"

as Mr. Steel always was, never mind at what early hour of the morning he had risen, or what rough work he might have done.

"You assuredly did not exaggerate the state of things," said Mr. Steel. "But had you, instead of indulging in rhetorical flourishes, made a simple statement of facts, supported by proofs, which you could easily have put forward—"

"I told you the truth," replied Brandling; "and I am not accustomed to consider it necessary to bring evidence in support of my assertions."

"Come, come, Mr. Brandling! This lofty tone is a little out of place. I tell you that, through the absence of sobriety and moderation in your statements, and through your failure to point to easily-attested facts, which it was your duty to refer to, you have seriously misled me, and in doing so you have been guilty of a grave dereliction of duty."

"If you have been misled, it has not been by me. And let me hear no more, sir, about 'proofs' and 'attesting of facts,' in connection with my assertions. I regard such allusions as an insult, which I will not permit. There may be persons whom you know in the position of gentlemen whose allegations require to be supported by proofs; but you will be good enough not to venture again to class me in that category. And it would be as well to bear in mind too, that a man who is capable of making a false statement may be capable also of trumping up false evidence to support it. That is the kind of person who has misled you, if any one has."

Mr. Steel was purple with anger at this presumptuous address.

"Whom—whom do you dare to allude to, sir?" he demanded. "Who do you—"

"Who do I say has misled you?" interrupted Brandling, who had also whipped his own anger beyond control. "Yourself, sir, yourself; your own self-conceit and greed of flattery."

"Enough, sir," cried the incensed Commissioner. "You will leave this at once. Order your horse, and begone within this half-hour, or I will have you put in charge of a guard of police. Return to your station, and there await the orders of Government, to whom I will refer your conduct and your language without delay."

At this moment Shafto, returning towards Gurhi Moofsid from his pursuit after the despoilers of Cheetun Shah's barns, rode up to the spot where they were standing, not a little amazed to see the usually calm Commissioner in a transport of anger, and his gaunt, lantern-jawed, and half-naked opponent, with flashing eyes and quivering nostrils, glaring at him, more like an incensed Paladin than a humble apothecary.

"Shafto," said Mr. Steel, "you will be good enough to accompany Mr. Brandling to Diknugger. You will see, if you please, that he leaves the Moofsid country without delay. Never mind Cheetun Shah's case; Captain Baytree will take up that inquiry himself."

Brandling turned scornfully away.

"Don't be afraid, sir," he said; "I will hasten to leave not only this place, but this service too, in which a man fails in his duty if he refuses to connive at villany and oppression or resents wanton aspersions on his honour."

The two combatants then parted, and each went his own way. And it was hard to say which was the more disagreeable companion to the two innocent persons whose ill-luck condemned them to their company for the rest of that day. The Commissioner, it is true, speedily brought his habitual self-control to bear, and was calm and composed as usual long before he rejoined Captain Baytree at Gurhi Moofsid. But what his ill-humour lost in violence it seemed to gain in intensity. Baytree endured such a castigation that day as even penetrated through his thick skin.

Shafto also found Brandling anything but an amiable companion during their long day's ride. He spoke scarcely at all, but rode along in moody silence, the workings of his face, every now and again, showing that the tempest of wrath was still raging beneath the surface. Once, when Shafto was more than usually pertinacious in endeavouring to engage him in conversation, he broke out with an angry and, as Shafto thought, somewhat overbearing reply. He had always been eccentric; and the truth probably was that his long vigil and fast, and tension of nerves, had a little unhinged his mind. Shafto, however, saw no reason why he should continue to be the butt of his spleen. So he made an excuse of wishing to inspect a certain police post, and leaving Brandling to follow the direct road to Diknugger, turned off and took a more circuitous route.

The distance between Gurhi Moofsid and Diknugger was over forty miles, a long day's journey for a single horse ridden, however carefully, by a heavy man. So Brandling halted for the night at a rest-house which stood about fifteen miles from the latter place. But Shafto, eager to reach the station, where Grace Hawthorn was, borrowed fresh nags from the police-officers at the stations which he passed on his way, and pushed on, intending to reach Diknugger that night.

Meantime Brandling had turned in to bed in the little roadside bungalow even before daylight had faded, and, utterly tired out, slept heavily till about two o'clock in the morning. When he awoke, and recalled to mind the occurrences of the preceding day, his perturbation of mind returned and prevented his sleeping again. He arose and walked up and down the little room, which was faintly lighted by the half-moon. It was evident that morning reflection had, as it is wont to do, brought some misgiving as to the perfect propriety of all that he had said and done the day before; for he now and again muttered half aloud such reassuring sentences as, "It was impossible for me to remain after what had been said. God knows, I held my post of duty as long as I could without dishonour."

He had been striding about for nearly an hour, and had just repeated this, or some similar phrase, for the third or fourth time, pausing in his walk at the end of the room furthest from the window as he did so, and pressing his hand to his brow, as though the formula was by no means all-potent to dispel the doubts of his conscience. "Yes, I am sure I was right," he added defiantly. And as though to prove to himself how completely satisfied his mind then was, he turned sharply round and resumed his walk with quite a brisk step. But ere he had advanced more than half across the little room, he came again to a dead stop. An ashy pallor overspread his face, and an unspeakable horror seemed to take hold of him. What was the cause? There, just outside the window facing him, in the moonlight which streamed down on the pillars of the verandah, there leant—or at least to his vision there seemed to lean—against one of those pillars the form of a woman, drooping and pale—pale as the cold moonlight in which it was bathed.

"Great Heaven!" he ejaculated, and fell upon his knees and hid his face in his hands. For a few moments he remained so. Then slowly rising, and seeming to overcome his horror by a great effort, he turned his face again towards the window. The figure was gone.

He hurriedly put on his clothes and went outside. There was no sign of any woman or of any other human being except his own servant rolled up in a blanket in the corner of the verandah, and snoring sonorously. He walked over to the police-station, and inquired whether any mem-sahib had passed. For this bungalow was situated at the point where the road to Gurhi Moofsid branched off from the great military road that, passing through Diknugger, connected the large cantonment of Béshuckabad with the hardly less important garrison station of Rungrootpore, and European travellers between the two occasionally passed along by dooly dawk. But none such had been seen by the sentry at the police-station gate that night.

"Assuredly," said Brandling to himself, in an awestruck whisper, "it was a vision. She came to warn me, when I was in the act of withdrawing my hand from the plough. O, my God! how pale, how ghastly pale! But let me be up and doing. Here, sentry, tell them to saddle my mare at once. Yes; I will go back to my work, back amongst my fever patients. Would that it were in Heaven's merciful will that my labours in that hospital and my anguish in this world might be ended together by— But no! No vain, unmanly repinings! The Commissioner *shall* let me go back to the work. I will grovel in the mire before him; ay, and before Baytree too. No form of apology, no extreme of self-abasement shall be too humiliating to be left untried to gain my point. Soh, my poor old lady," he added, speaking to the mare which was led out from the stable-yard ready saddled, "it is hard on you, who never lost your temper nor shirked your work, to have all that weary trudge back again."

Then mounting, he set his face again towards Gurhi Moofsid. It certainly did seem as if the strain on his bodily and mental powers had somewhat disturbed his wits.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO ROBUST COURTSHIPS COME TO AN UNTIMELY DEATH, ONE HAVING CAUGHT COLD AT THE FUNERAL OF THE OTHER.

OTHER persons in whom we are interested were more or less wakeful on this busy night. Ravensmore, huffed at Grace's persistent coldness towards him ever since the day of the shooting-party, left Mrs. Steel's drawing-room tent at Diknugger early after dinner. The ladies themselves retired to their respective sleeping-apartments not long after—long enough, however, for Mrs. Steel and Grace Hawthorn to have had a battle-royal in the mean time. Mrs. Steel had said things which cut the poor girl's feelings deeply. But Grace could console herself now with the glorious thought that this would not be for long; that soon she would have a strong and loving arm around her to shield her from Mrs. Steel's insults, and from all other harm whatever. She had not yet told any one of her engagement. Shafto's sudden departure, and Mr. Steel's own so soon afterwards, had prevented her. But she hoped to obtain her guardian's consent the moment he returned; and once that was done, she would feel secure under her future husband's protection.

Nevertheless she felt Mrs. Steel's cruel words and coarse insinuations keenly, and she cried bitterly as soon as she got safe within her own tent, and could do so without affording her tormentor cause for triumph. Bitter tears, and perhaps angry thoughts, kept her long awake after she had laid her head upon the pillow. And when at last she fell asleep, it was to dream troubled dreams, in which Mrs. Steel seemed somehow mixed up, as a malignant fiend, with the tragic story of her mother's fate. She was suddenly aroused by a shake, and, opening her eyes, saw Mrs. Steel bending over her. Only half awake, and scarcely knowing whether she was even yet dreaming, or whether her previous dreams were not in fact reality, she was quite scared by

Mrs. Steel's appearance. The fat and usually peony-hued face and neck were ghastly pale, and she gasped and shivered as if in an ague fit.

"Get up, Grace," she said, in a hoarse, unnatural whisper.

"What is the matter? Are you ill, Mrs. Steel?" exclaimed Grace, springing out of bed.

"Bella—Bella!" was the reply. Mrs. Steel seemed not to be able to gasp out more.

"Is Bella ill?" asked Grace, in great agitation.

"She is *gone*—gone," replied the hoarse whisper.

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"She has run away—fled from her father's house with that villain."

"Impossible. I can't believe it. How do you know? why do you think so?"

Mrs. Steel handed her a letter, the envelope of which had been torn open. Grace read it in utter dismay. It was in Bella's writing, and addressed to her mother. It was in the approved style of such letters left behind them by eloping young ladies in novels, with the kindly and dutiful intention of reassuring their parents. After a deal of balderdash about love, and constancy, and cruelty, and what not, it conveyed the practical information that the thoughtful and delicate Rattley had made all arrangements—including, as it was to be presumed, the license, the parson, and the clerk to give her away—for their being married at eight o'clock the next morning.

"It will kill her father," said Mrs. Steel, wringing her hands in agony. "His only child! The only one whom Heaven left to us! Ah, the others were taken from me for my sin; but I—both of us—believed that this one was spared in mercy. Little, little did we think, when we thanked God for her life, that it was preserved only to make our punishment ten thousand times more bitter. O George! O my husband! He will die beneath this blow. Grace Hawthorn, if you have a heart capable of common gratitude, save your benefactor's child—save his gray hairs from being brought with dishonour to the grave!"

Grace, we may be sure, needed no such exhortation. But at first she was as distracted and helpless as Mrs. Steel herself. But after a time she collected her wits and began to think what could be done. It would probably have been easy enough to overtake the fugitives long before they could reach any place where they could possibly be married—that is, either Béshuckabad or Rungrootpore. They had probably counted upon getting full seven or eight hours' start, not supposing that Bella's absence would be discovered till the morning. It was mere chance which had taken Mrs. Steel into her daughter's tent about one o'clock. And as it was most unlikely that Bella would have ventured to leave the camp until the servants had all retired to rest, it was probable that she had not been gone more than an hour, or an hour and a half at most, when her mother discovered her flight. So to merely intercept and bring her back seemed to both ladies a small matter. But the great problem was to do so in such a manner that her elopement should not be known to all the world—above all, that her father should never hear a whisper of it.

After a few moments' anxious thought, Grace said,

"There is only one person whom we can trust to—Mr. Ravensmore. Let him take Captain Baytree's dog-cart and follow them."

"But by which road? who knows which way they have gone? And if we make inquiries, her flight will become known at once."

"I think there can be no doubt," replied Grace, "that they have gone to Rungrootpore. It is quite impossible that this man can have arranged for the marriage at our own station."

"But she will not return for Charles Ravensmore," again objected Mrs. Steel.

"No; you must go with him," answered Grace.

But even in the extremity of her distress Mrs. Steel could not be induced to do this. She pleaded, and not without much truth, that she was so upset and prostrated by her discovery that she was physically unfit for the exertion which Grace proposed. Grace tried to overcome her objections, but in vain. Then she remained silent for a little, and, from the intense look of thought which her face wore, she seemed to be engaged in a hard struggle in her own mind. It was soon over.

"Then I will go with him," she said.

The preparations for the pursuit were quickly made. Grace scribbled a note to Ravensmore, which Mrs. Steel gave to the police sentry who was on guard at the camp, to carry to the young man's tent. Then when Grace was dressed, Mrs. Steel called the sentry away on some pretence to enable Grace to pass out unseen, and she walked along the Rungrootpore road until overtaken by Ravensmore in the dog-cart. It is unnecessary to follow her further. They drove many miles, and Ravensmore made cautious inquiries in sundry villages; but without success, and they returned to Diknugger just as morning dawned. As Grace walked into the camp, and took leave of the young gentleman, who accompanied her to the door of her tent, no doubt the servants, who were just beginning to be astir, wondered what had made the Miss Sahib suddenly take to such very early hours.

Now, the fact was, that Grace's reasoning regarding the road which the fugitives would take was only sound up to a certain point. Supposing their object to be to get married without Bella's parents' consent, there would certainly be fewer difficulties in their way at Rungrootpore, where they were not known, than at Béshuckabad, of which the chaplain was Mr. Steel's intimate friend. But only one of the couple had any such vain hope or intention. Mr. Rattley Trapton was much too practical a man of the world to really attempt so mad an enterprise as inducing the chaplain of an up-country station to marry him out of hand to a girl of eighteen. Besides which, even had he thought this feasible, it would not have suited his purpose. If he succeeded in marrying Bella, and thus put the affair beyond all further hope or fear of being made better or worse, the probability was that her father would cut her off with a pice; and the possession of the hand of a bonny but tocherless lass was by no manner of means the object of the prudent Rattley's devices. No, he had a much more sensible plan. It was to completely compromise Bella, but to do this so cautiously that it should rest entirely in his own hands whether the matter should be proclaimed or hushed up. With this alternative he would go boldly to Mr. Steel and demand what price he was willing to pay. Whether the person of the fair and deluded Bella should form a part of—perhaps it would be more correct to say a drawback on—the said price, he was indifferent.

Soon after midnight Bella—disguised in a suit of her papa's clothes, shooting-coat, riding-breeches, and gaiters, which she had managed to secretly abstract from his portmanteau the day before, and had "taken in" here and there to reduce them to such dimensions as might pass by moonlight as a tolerable fit for her, and carrying in her hand a bundle containing habiliments better adapted for her proposed appearance in Rungrootpore Church that morning—stole like a modern Jessica from her tent. The sentry was mildly surprised to see the Commissioner Sahib, whom he had supposed to be at Gurhi Moofsid, walking about the camp; but of course never dreamed of challenging him. So she got safely away without exciting alarm or suspicion, and soon reached the appointed trysting-place outside the station, where Trapton was waiting with the horses. Here the first unpleasant reality protruded itself through the golden haze of romance, in which the whole adventure had been enveloped in her anticipations. The horse prepared for her had a man's saddle; to have put a side-saddle on, Trapton said, would have been sure to excite attention. Now, Bella was not a first-rate, nor by any means a bold, rider at best, and she soon found the unaccustomed seat very trying. Indeed, so little real hardihood had Bella to carry her through the enterprise which she had so lightly undertaken, that before they had gone far Trapton saw with alarm that this trivial inconvenience was very likely to induce her to turn back. That, at least, he thought, must be put out of her power. So, suddenly declaring that he heard the sound of horses galloping after them, he seized her bridle-rein, and calling out to her to sit close, turned from the road and dashed at full speed across country. After galloping a couple of miles or so, he at last yielded to Bella's entreaties and drew rein. Indeed, his object was gained; he knew now that it would be impossible for her to find her way back to Diknugger in the dark, so he was content to make the whole of the remainder of the journey, if she so wished it, at a walk.

Trapton knew the country well, being a great sportsman, and having frequently shot over most parts of the Diknugger district. And whilst he told Bella that they were going along parallel with the Rungrootpore road, but only keeping some distance from it to avoid pursuit, he was, as a matter of fact, leading her straight across towards Gurhi Moofsid.

They had been several hours on their journey, and Bella, thoroughly tired, had plaintively moaned for the tenth time, "Are we not near Rungrootpore *yet?*" when Trapton thought the time had come when he might put an end to uncertainty and reveal his real plans.

"Rungrootpore, you foolish girl!" he answered, with a laugh. "Do you know how far Rungrootpore is off? Somewhere between seventy and eighty miles. But don't be discouraged, *ma belle;* we are within ten minutes' ride of our journey's end."

"What do you mean? Where are you taking me to, then?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I forget the name of the place; but I know it well. It is a very snug little rest-house—like all those in Baytree's district, blessings on his head!—where I have spent many a jolly night and day when out here shooting, but none so pleasant as those I look forward to now. It is the half-way house between Diknugger and Gurhi Moofsid. There is another bungalow nearer to the former place, where we might have halted, and so saved you some fatigue; but it is unfortunately on the Rungrootpore road, along which the pursuers were likely to go, so it would hardly have suited our purpose."

"I will not go to any house—I will go nowhere but to the church at Rungrootpore," cried Bella, checking her horse.

Trapton shrugged his shoulders, and a smile of intense amusement beamed over his handsome countenance.

"Wretch! perjured villain! heartless fiend! you have betrayed me!" broke out Bella, now thoroughly comprehending the trap into which she had fallen. And then followed a torrent of impassioned, scarce coherent denunciation of his treachery, mingled with bitterly penitential curses on her own folly and wickedness.

Trapton listened to both equally placidly.

"Well," he said good-naturedly, when her outburst had spent its first force, and she paused to sob, "as you don't seem anxious for my company at the bungalow, I will not force it upon you. You shall have the house to yourself. I will leave you there in charge of my old bearer, Botul—a most respectable old cove, who is even now waiting our arrival—and I will push on at once to Gurhi Moofsid, and announce to your venerated papa that you have arrived so far on the journey of life, which we propose to travel henceforth together."

The image of her father's wrath, so closely imminent, thus called up in Bella's mind, was all that was needed to complete her utter desperation. Of course she had known that this would have to be encountered sooner or later; but she had always looked for it "later," and she was (morally) near-sighted. Events close at hand her imagination pictured very distinctly, but those only a little way off in the future made but a blurred and hazy impression on her mind's eye. The idea of her father being actually within a few miles, and about to hear of her escapade within an hour or two, gave her a terrible shock. Escape might be utterly hopeless, but flight was now none the less an irresistible impulse. Without a word of warning she turned her horse, and, careless now alike of the uneasiness and precariousness of her unaccustomed seat, gave it the rein and struck it with her whip with all the force which terror and despair could lend to her arm. With a tremendous bound, which would assuredly have left her behind had she not grasped the streaming mane just in time, the animal answered the unexpected call, and flew wildly into the night. Before Trapton could recover from his surprise, horse and rider were almost out of sight, for the moon was nearly set, and the night growing quickly dark. He was soon, however, in full gallop behind her. It was an exciting race to him as well as to her. That she could save herself he knew was impossible, as she could not find her way home. But she might, nevertheless, ruin his carefully-devised scheme. Unless he could overtake her, all hope of keeping the night's adventure hushed up would soon be gone, and with it his only means of driving a bargain with Mr. Steel. Nay, unless she could be stopped before the whole country-side was aroused, the wisest course for Rattley Trapton to take, in the very critical condition in which his affairs—financial, professional, and domestic—then happened to be, would be to make the best of his way to Bombay, or other convenient seaport, and thence to Polynesia. So he strained every nerve to catch her up before she should go clattering through the next village, which he knew could not be more than a mile or two distant. But Bella was as well mounted as he was, her weight was much lighter, and she continued to urge her horse forward with reckless fury, still gallantly grasping the mane the while, though Trapton was not near enough to observe that detail.

But suddenly he saw Bella stop. There was a clump of trees, which cast a dense shadow across the road, and she had pulled up just short of it. Perhaps the horse had shied at the shadow, or there might be some obstacle which the shadow prevented his being able to distinguish. In either case the opportunity was not to be lost, and before she could get her full speed up again he might be upon her. He was only a hundred yards behind. She had paused in the moonlight, where he could see her clearly, only for a moment or two, and had then passed on within the gloom under the trees. Whether she was still standing there, or had galloped onward again, he could not make out. But when he got within forty or fifty yards of the spot, to his intense joy and triumph he saw her emerge again, and ride slowly back towards him.

"A pretty race you have given me, you little vixen!" he called out laughingly, as he slackened his speed within a short distance from her. "But I'll take deuced good care you sha'n't lead me such another till I have you safely stowed in old Botul's keeping."

"You ruffian! *I* will take good care of that. You shall presently receive at my hands a prize for winning the race you speak of that shall make you never wish to ride such another to the longest day you live!"

Such was the reply that Trapton received, and that certainly took him very considerably aback. But it was not spoken in Miss Steel's soprano tones, but in a very decided broad-chested baritone. And Trapton, on looking more closely at the speaker, observed, indeed, that he bore a very small resemblance to his late companion, whom he had too carelessly taken it for granted that it must be, never dreaming of the likelihood of another person appearing on the scene. He could now, however, see Bella and her steed standing, both panting for breath and trembling with excitement, under the trees; and the person who was advancing towards him, with a sufficiently threatening air, soon joined in the *rencontre*, being no other than Dr. Brandling, who, as we know, was at this time also journeying towards Gurhi Moofsid.

Bella, on meeting Brandling, had implored his protection. The doctor, in the dim moonlight and the hurry of the moment, might have had some difficulty in understanding either her sex or her situation, but that the first point was made clear by the accident of her long fair hair having fallen loose during her wild gallop, and streaming far behind her like the tail of a comet as she dashed up to him. As to what had brought a beautiful girl to such a place, at such a time, and in such a disguise, that was a more complicated question, but one, the chivalrous doctor thought, which might wait for elucidation at more leisure. It was enough that she cried out, "If you are a man, protect me from this villain. He has lured me here by lies and the basest treachery, and now he seeks my ruin."

Brandling, sufficiently pugnacious, as we know, and only too ready to lay proud oppressors low, never hesitated a moment, but advanced to oppose Trapton, as above described. The baffled Rattley's rage knew no bounds when he discovered his mistake.

"By ——!" he shouted, "I will not be baulked. That little idiot has ruined the plan that would have left her honour safe, and now she may rue the consequences. As for you, whoever you are, pass on in the devil's name, if you value a whole skull. I am not in a mood to be trifled with. And," he added, scanning the stranger from head to foot, "I am twice as heavy as you, half your age, and have"—shaking a heavily-loaded hunting-crop—"this little ally to help me, and I promise you I will use all three advantages to the full without compunction."

Brandling's reply to this menace consisted in pushing his horse violently against Trapton, who aimed a downright blow at his head with the whip, but it fell only on his shoulder. The next moment the doctor was grappling with the hussar, who, before many seconds passed, proved himself the worse cavalry soldier of the two by rolling ignominiously from his saddle. The victorious Brandling, like the heroic knights in Scott's novels, was off his own steed in a twinkling, and prepared to renew the combat on foot. But Trapton was at heart a cur; and finding that, contrary to appearances, he was not greatly superior to his opponent in strength, he declined the challenge. The doctor then, seizing him by the collar, dragged him to where Bella stood, an admiring witness of the affray, and called upon both for an explanation of the remarkable circumstances in which he found them. He listened to as much as they respectively thought fit to give; and warning Trapton, as he loved his life, never to dare to breathe a word of that night's doings to a living soul, he then mounted his nag, and set out to escort Miss Steel on her long and weary ride back to Diknugger.

They got back before daylight, and the doctor contrived to smugggle Bella into her mother's tent unseen. And then, having consigned his interesting young charge to the maternal arms, retired to his own modest lodging, to seek what repose he might after the varied fatigues and agitations of the past day and night.

And now we must return to Shafto, whom we left making *his* way towards Diknugger many hours ago. He should have reached home before even Bella set out on her unlucky expedition. But accidents will happen, and some accident had delayed Shafto. I must doubtless have been told at some time or other what it was; but if so, I quite forget. Nor can it be of the smallest consequence to the reader to know. It is sufficient that, from one cause or another, the gong at the gaol guard was just beating seven o'clock in the morning when Shafto, very sleepy after his night ride, and indeed occasionally nodding in his saddle, passed it on his way homewards. The road by which he had entered the station led him through the "Government" garden, beyond the further hedge of which ran that road which led to Rungrootpore. As he passed out through the garden gate on to this latter road, the Commissioner's tents stood on an open piece of ground about a hundred yards to his left; Captain Baytree's house was about half that distance on his right; the path to his own humble quarters lay right before him. As he crossed the road he looked first to the right, and saw with some surprise Captain Baytree's dog-cart and horse being led towards the stable. The man who was leading the horse was on the far side of the animal, and Shafto did not therefore perceive, what doubtless would not have lessened his surprise, that it was not a syce, but the conceited Under-Secretary to the Government of the Mâ Bâp Provinces who performed this menial office. However, he was too sleepy to speculate as to what or who had taken the Deputy-Commissioner's trap out at that early hour. Then he looked down the road the other way, and all at once became very wide awake, for there was Grace Hawthorn, wrapped in a great fur cloak, tripping along towards the camp. He was beside her in a moment, and off his horse. She welcomed him with an exclamation of surprise and delight. The blush and the smile which sprang spontaneously to her face in the first moment of their unexpected meeting, when she was taken quite unawares, bore the stamp of genuineness in every tint and every dimple, and should have convinced anybody, who had eyes to see, of the girl's transparent honesty, whatever suspicious circumstances might afterwards turn up to muddy the waters. But unfortunately that familiar demon of Shafto's, of which I have before made mention, sometimes blindfolded him so that he could not see the plainest truths just before his nose.

They had not exchanged many words before Miss Hawthorn's manner underwent a palpable change. She became embarrassed, *distraite*, and evidently anxious to escape into her tent. When it is remembered that she did not yet know of Bella's return, this may easily be accounted for.

"What has brought you out so early?" asked Shafto.

"To meet you, of course," she answered, laughing.

"Why, how did you know I was coming?"

"O, is there not," replied Grace, "a magic wire of sympathy which telegraphs to the heart the news that somebody very dear is approaching?"

"The electric fluid seems only good at a distance, then," said Shafto; "for you had apparently given me up and turned back when I was within a few yards of you. But, without chaff, tell me where you have been."

"I can't just now. I must get in. There! make haste home, and come over again a little before nine. I may have some distressing news to tell you, I fear."

"What is it? Tell me now."

"I can't. You must have patience. It will be a wholesome exercise."

And she vanished within Mrs. Steel's tent. Shafto turned homewards, and as he walked back along the Rungrootpore road, whom should he meet but Ravensmore. "Ah!" he muttered to himself, after he had passed the young secretary with a scowl that was much more perceptible than the nod which accompanied it, "there is another early riser in the camp, I see, besides Grace."

At nine o'clock, according to appointment, Shafto was again at the camp, and found Grace seated under a tree some little distance from the tents, reading.

"And now," he said, "I want to know in plain terms what you were doing out so early this morning."

"In plain terms, then, I was taking a walk," Grace answered, telling, I am afraid, not exactly a fib, but an infinitesimal portion of the truth.

"Alone?" Shafto inquired.

"You can answer that question, I think, for yourself, Mr. Grand Inquisitor."

"Yes," said Shafto very gravely, "I am afraid I can. Nevertheless, I must ask you to answer it too, Miss Hawthorn."

"Miss Hawthorn!" exclaimed Grace, first flushing and then growing pale. Poor girl! She saw plainly now that all hope of evasion was gone, and that the great sacrifice was to be required of her—the sacrifice of her life's happiness on the altar of gratitude. "Miss Hawthorn! Why do you speak like this?"

"Was your companion this morning Mr. Ravensmore?" demanded Shafto sternly. "Why don't you answer? But your silence and your shamefaced look are a sufficient confession."

"I have no *confession* to make, Mr. Shafto," replied Grace, lifting her head proudly. "But why should I call you so, when I have a right, which I have done nothing to forfeit, to use another name? I repeat, I have nothing to *confess—Jack.*"

"Then if it is not to be a confession, perhaps you will favour me at any rate with an *explanation.*"

"I cannot do that either," answered Grace sadly. "I *was* out with Mr. Ravensmore this morning. We were engaged together in a matter of deep concern to other persons, of none to ourselves. I cannot tell even you what it was. It is a secret so deeply affecting another. And indeed I have made a solemn promise never to breathe it to any living soul. After our marriage, Jack, it might be my duty to tell you, but I dare not before, even—even if—whatever my silence may cost me."

"Do you expect me to believe this?"

"I swear before Heaven that it is true, and that I have been faithful to my promise to you, as I ever will be, in thought, word, and deed."

"Dare you tell me, upon your oath, that no word of love passed between you and Ravensmore this morning?"

Grace blushed deeply. She dared not; for indeed Ravensmore had taken advantage of the situation to make desperate love to her during their drive back, and had not desisted even when she had, in self-defence, told him of her engagement to Shafto.

"I can only tell the truth," she said. "I was compelled by the necessity of the emergency, which was the cause of your meeting me out so early this morning, to be in Mr. Ravensmore's company for some time. I could not prevent him saying what he chose. But I swear, by all that I hold most holy, that not a word passed my lips which I should have been ashamed for you yourself to hear."

"Protestations are easily made, Miss Hawthorn. A woman who breaks troth with a man will not hesitate to deceive him with false oaths. Breach of troth is what I charge—what manifest appearances have given me every right to charge—you with. And something more substantial than oaths and protestations are required to disprove the charge."

"The charge I reject with scorn," exclaimed Grace, with flashing eyes; "and I retort it upon you. It is *you* who have broken troth. You professed to love me, and now you assail me with foul suspicions, which are utterly incompatible with love."

"If the suspicions are groundless, they are easily refuted, by simply speaking out the truth," answered Shafto. "As for any promise of secrecy you may have made, it is simply absurd to pretend to urge it. When my happiness is at stake,—nay, that is comparatively a trifle; when my faith in woman, in truth itself, is in jeopardy,—you have no right to plead paltry promises of secrecy."

But Grace remained firm in her resolve to be silent. It would be a nice problem in casuistry to decide whether she was right or wrong. Probably the first impulse of everybody will be to say, "Wrong;" she had no right to wreck her lover's happiness, to say nothing of her own, for such a mere scruple as keeping, to the very letter, her promise made to Mrs. Steel and Bella. But there is something to be said on the other side. If the issue for herself and Shafto involved happiness, the issue for Bella involved what was more important still, her honour and fair name. Was Grace justified in voluntarily giving these over to the keeping of any man, however much she herself might rely on his discretion and trustworthiness? When Shafto should become her husband, it would doubtless be right that she should keep no secret from him, whether her own or those of others. But this very dispute in which they were engaged might remind her of the possibility that he might never marry her. And in that case what would be Bella's position, with the dearest secret of her life intrusted to one who had become altogether estranged from them? It was true that three persons outside the family already knew it—more was the pity!—but that had been unavoidable, and made it still more imperatively necessary that the circle should on no consideration be widened. For myself, I am inclined to think that Grace did right. At all events, she acted on a good broad principle, which, if steadily followed, may indeed lead one into error, but it will assuredly be an error, as the phrase is, "on the right side." If in doubt between two courses, each of which must involve injury—one to yourself amongst others, the other to somebody else only—choose the former.

I will not pursue the dialogue between Shafto and Grace further; it would not tend to edification. One reproach led to another, and bitterness arose from the very torture of the wounds which each cutting remark made in the soul of the one who uttered it.

> "Each spoke words of high disdain
> And insult."

Shafto was, I must acknowledge, so unmanly as to give expression to the suspicion which had crossed his mind when Mrs. Steel had made that proposal regarding the "few thousand rupees." This insult was too much for Grace.

"Thank you, thank you for saying this at last," she said. "But O, how I wish you had done so before! It would have saved me the pain and humiliation of this long conversation. And so, sir, you proposed to take to yourself a wife of whom you thought so meanly, that at the mere suggestion of your own fancy you concluded that she might have been an accomplice in a base and sordid conspiracy. I may indeed congratulate myself on the fortunate accident which has enlightened me regarding Mr. Shafto's notions of the sort of woman who is fit to become his wife. I am certainly not such a one!"

She stalked away very disdainfully, and left poor Shafto (truth to say) not knowing exactly what to think. He too presently turned away and walked home, far from satisfied with himself. Of course the assertion which he kept repeating over and over again to his own heart, that after what he had seen he could not have done otherwise than he had done, admitted of no denial. But none the less was he fully conscious that he should never find another to keep the said "hollow heart from paining."

As to Grace, she disappeared inside her tent, where, whether she incontinently threw herself on her bed and gave way to a passionate storm of sobs and tears (which, I believe, is the proper procedure for a young lady under such circumstances), I cannot say, not having myself received any authentic information on that point. But whatever may have been her behaviour — whether pride or grief may have got the upper hand in her bosom, where no doubt they had a hard tussle for it—one thing I feel pretty sure she did, and that was to take out her mother's letter—that sacred and talismanic relic—and read it over and kiss it again for the hundredth time.

CHAPTER XVII.

CRESSIDA IN THE GRECIAN CAMP.

> "She was beloved, she loved; she is, and doth;
> But, still, sweet love is food for fortune's tooth."

EARLY in May, Mrs. Steel, with the two young ladies of her household, took wing for their usual flight to the hills. This year she did not go to Simla. Perhaps that incautious remark about "pretentious vulgarity," which, as reported in an early chapter, had been conveyed to her from the lips of Lady Feathertop, who still reigned as queen of the gods on that Olympus, may have had something to do in determining the Commissioner's lady to establish her summer quarters elsewhere. And the concatenation of circumstances which compelled the Under-Secretary to the Government of the Mâ Bâp Provinces to abide with the chief of his office, and the Secretary in his turn to remain in attendance on the Lieutenant-Governor, and induced the Lieutenant-Governor himself to set up his staff at a modest little mountain retreat situated within his domains, and rejoicing in the picturesque name of Guppy Tibby, may possibly have guided the provident matron to her selection of that particular spot.

There is, as the merest smatterer in physical science knows, in the air of the Himalayas and the other great mountain ranges of India, a particular form of ozone, which is extraordinarily stimulative of the faculties of flirtation. This marvellous element has the property of transmuting—perhaps I had better say of electro-plating—everything which comes within its influence with a gloss of pleasant sentimentality. The very villas and cottages sprinkled about amongst the pine-trees and ferns on the slopes of an Indian hill-station always rejoice in poetically suggestive names. Going along the Mall at Guppy Tibby, for instance, you would pass a succession of neatly-painted little signboards, emblazoned with such titles as "Fairy Dell" and "The Naiads' Well," "Dove Cot" and "Sabrina Grot." Such designations might excite derision elsewhere, but the soul of the visitor to the hills becomes gradually attuned to the feelings in which they have their birth. In the course of his journey upwards from the parched and arid plains, the soft wooing of the wild-flower carpeted banks, the amorous languor of the balmy air, the gentle murmurs of the whispering pines, the warble of the shy, half-hidden waterfall, which stirs the sweet song-birds to tuneful emulation, all entrance and enwrap his being. So that the rosy-cheeked Adonis of the Hussars, although in the cantonment of Béshuckabad "hunting he loved, and love he laughed to scorn," and regarded pig-sticking and polo as the only pursuits worthy of a man, no sooner finds himself at Guppy Tibby on two months' leave than, instead of mounting hog-maned steeds to fright the souls of fearful adversaries, he capers nimbly in a lady's chamber to the lascivious pleasing of a lute, or more probably a piano. Even the Orson of the Settlement Department, wont in the cold season to roam about the fields in a garb compounded of those of Robinson Crusoe and the ancient British navvy, when he betakes himself to the Hills "to write his report," will court an amorous looking-glass, and strut before an ambling wanton nymph, like a Record of Rights gone wrong. And not only the young men are thus infected. The old boys, too, as they plod their way up the hill on their fat Yarkundi ponies, are roused to emulation by the fuller crimson of the robin's breast, and the lively iris changing on the burnished wing of the jungle cock, or the tail of the painted monâl, which flit across their path by the way, and, smartening themselves up, they let their vagrant fancies lightly turn to thoughts of love.

Our two young ladies, notwithstanding the severe blow which the feelings of each had sustained at the beginning of the year, were not proof against the subtle influence of this atmosphere during the long months of summer which they passed at Guppy Tibby. Bella flirted at large: the copious fountains of coquetry within her, which had lately been pent within a single grim and narrow channel by her perverse romance with Trapton, now meandered through a hundred sunny streams.

Grace exercised more self-restraint. But she was by no means unfeeling in her treatment of the numerous love-sick patients who appealed to her for relief. Ravensmore was not nearly so assiduous in his attentions to her as he had been at Béshuckabad and Diknugger; the reason of his comparative neglect being that he was now back at his work. And a more conscientious workman than the young Under-Secretary never plodded through a file. Love might rule the court, the camp, the grove; but in the secretarial office of the Mâ Bâp Provinces duty reigned supreme. So at the rides, the walks, the picnics, the sauntering at the band-stand, those markets overt of love, where admirers most did congregate, and the briskest traffic of sighs and whispers and languishing looks was carried on, Charley Ravensmore was never seen. It was only on Sundays, or occasionally of a weekday after dinner, that the ladies ever saw him. Mrs. Steel was rejoiced at this. But she was wrong. She did not sufficiently consider that there are things

> "Whereof a little
> More than a little is by much too much."

Had Ravensmore continued at Guppy Tibby to pester Grace with his unremitting assiduities, so that she could scarce get a chance of a word with anybody else, he would have been "but as the cuckoo is in June"—a nuisance. But now his attentions "won by rareness much solemnity," and he decidedly gained in Grace's opinion by contrast with the

> "Shallow jesters, and rash bavin wits,
> Soon kindled and soon burned,"

who constantly ambled up and down in her train and Bella's.

It must be mentioned, however, that Mrs. Steel had another ground for hoping that Ravensmore's infatuation for Miss Hawthorn was over. For since Bella had had her eyes opened by Trapton's villainy, she had shown a decided disposition to look with favour on Charles Ravensmore. And on the occasions of his visits to their house she made a point of monopolising him, and would hardly allow him to go near Grace. Nor did Charles appear to struggle against this manner of being disposed of. But there was a circumstance which Mrs. Steel did not know of, which, had she done so, would doubtless have made her view the matter in a very much less roseate light.

It will be remembered that a certain Mrs. Archer, whom we saw at the tennis-party where Ravensmore made his first appearance in these pages, was an old friend of his, and had also a liking for Grace. Indeed, it was she who had introduced the two young people to each other. Now, Mrs. Archer was also at Guppy Tibby this year, and was in the habit of enticing Grace into the pretty drawing-room of her snug little cottage as often as she could. Mrs. Steel and her daughter never entered that apartment. As noted on an earlier page, the former lady did not love Mrs. Archer. Such being the case, it would have been difficult for Grace to be much there either, under any other circumstances than those which actually did subsist between Mrs. Steel and her young guest. But Mrs. Steel's hatred towards Grace was more virulent than ever. She could seldom bring herself to speak to her in the privacy of the domestic circle without actual rudeness, and even in public she was far from civil. Mr. Steel's absence, while it probably had much to do with his wife's unrestrained insolence, had at the same time removed the most potent check on Grace's temper, which, though good and sweet, was not quite imperturbable. So, during their stay in the Hills, violent altercations between these two ladies were far from infrequent, wherein the younger, albeit she had not her senior's large grasp of the vocabulary of vituperation, and wanted the advantage of a tongue dipped in venom, nevertheless dealt back some very downright blows, and thrust occasionally with point unbated.

It thus fell out that, after a time, Mrs. Steel and Grace were equally willing to have a short respite from each other's society as often as they could, and with this excellent object in view, it became tacitly agreed between them that the latter was to be allowed to visit Mrs. Archer as often as she felt inclined, without any objection being made by the former. But then Mrs. Steel never dreamed for a moment that Charles Ravensmore contrived, notwithstanding the exigencies of his official labours, to make occasional calls at Mrs. Archer's cottage. Indeed, as a matter of fact, he was much oftener there than at Mrs. Steel's grander mansion. He would even now and then steal (in the most dishonest manner) an hour from the very heart and centre of the working day, to run over for lunch with Mrs. Archer. When he thus embezzled, as it were, and dissipated on his own private pleasures, the time of his employer, the State, it was generally in obedience to a little three-cornered pink note, which would be delivered to him not ten minutes before the hour fixed for lunch to be on the table. And when, laying hold of a Famine Commission Report, or other weighty tome, he laid it down on the scattered papers over which he had been poring, to keep them in their places, seized his hat, and ran down the steep short cut to Mrs. Archer's cottage, it generally so happened that, when he arrived, he found, by a strange coincidence, Miss Hawthorn had also accepted an invitation from this lady to stay to tiffin.

"Brownie's Ring," which was the elegant name by which Mrs. Archer's residence was known, was a pretty many-gabled house, built of rough-faced stone, and roofed with shingle. It was delightfully pitched on the gentle slope of a wooded hillside. From the trellised verandah, about which the roses clambered, and hung in great clusters and fantastic festoons, or from the little circle of the brightest and softest of grass just below, there was a lovely view. Through a vista of dark cedars one got the most delicious peep possible of the beautiful profile of the everlasting snows, traced aerially across the surface of the clear blue sky—on the left, a sharp sugar-loaf peak, deserving the epithet both by its shape and colour; then a jagged line, with countless points protruding from a mass of fathomless snow-drifts, that have never degenerated into slush since the days of Noah; and on the right, an undulating sweep of shining white, hazily merging into the pale-blue ether, as it stretches far, far away, and is lost in the distance. Between these mighty frozen mountains, and the more genial range on which the little pine-girt ring of emerald turf formed a sunny spot, a huge amphitheatre intervened, along the bottom of which, two thousand feet down, a glittering river wound its course between verdant rice-fields and terraces covered with mellowing barley.

On the other side of the house the primeval foliage had never known the axe; and the profane vulgar, who passed to and fro along the public road thirty or forty yards higher up the hill, could only, even by standing on the wooden rails and peering over the tree-tops with curious gaze, catch sight at most of a gable-end or the rim of a chimney-pot. Never was there a bower more sequestered than the drawing-room of that little cottage and its roseate-framed verandah. And if the fingers of a young man carelessly laid on the little round table, as he stooped over to examine the flowers in the Venetian vase, happened to touch the fingers of a maid which equally carelessly rested thereon, neither the soul of young man nor maid need have been disquieted within them by the fear that any malicious or prudish eye could have witnessed the embarrassing little accident—unless indeed it might be that of some scandalised dowager dame ibex browsing on the pastures at the foot of the snows some eighty miles or so away.

The silent influence of the scene of his meetings with Grace was a potent ally to Ravensmore. And he also had another, who, far from being silent, made good use on his behalf of her tongue, a weapon of admirable point and temper. Mrs. Archer lost no opportunity of discoursing to Grace on the varied excellences of Ravensmore's character, and also of insidiously undermining whatever regretful memories of her former luckless love might still linger in the girl's heart.

And Grace listened to her complacently enough. She would sometimes comment with light ridicule on her friend's eulogiums when they waxed very enthusiastic; but Mrs. Archer observed with satisfaction that there was no drop of the venom of scorn in her playful gibes.

"Dear me!" said Grace one day, when Mrs. Archer had been dilating on her usual theme, as they sat snug in the little drawing-room over five-o'clock tea, "if I could remember half the things you say about Mr. Ravensmore when I get home, and write them in a letter to Major Archer, we should have him riding up post-haste from

Béshuckabad to look after his domestic peace. Upon my word, I am not sure it is not my duty to warn him."

"Ah, if I were ten years younger," replied Mrs. Archer, "I would not answer for myself. But in that case, my dear, you may be quite sure that *you* would not have been admitted within the magic circle of Brownie's Ring, so you would not have been able to report to my husband."

"Well, you are a zealous advocate," said Grace. "No one can accuse you of lukewarmness in speaking up for your friends. I wonder if you find a quarter as many good things to say about me behind my back? I fear not."

"To Charles Ravensmore, do you mean?" said Mrs. Archer. "Certainly not; I abuse you and make fun of you in every possible way to him, poor fellow! But"—with a sigh—"it is no good!"

"Come, that is unkind. The abuse I don't so much mind. But I must say the idea of being made fun of by *you* is not one calculated to promote one's peace of mind. Besides," added Grace, with a merry twinkle in her eye, "Mr. Ravensmore has such a terribly keen sense of humour."

"Don't you be so silly as to despise him for that, Grace. Men with a fine sense of humour are very pleasant to talk to; but when one comes to have any closer sort of relations with them, their humours are sometimes apt to break out in directions that are not at all pleasant. *Par exemple*, a little bird has whispered to me that a certain very humorous and witty gentleman of Miss Hawthorn's acquaintance not very long ago exhibited his humorous talents in a manner far from amiable."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Archer," said Grace, blushing; "as I believe you never even saw the person you allude to, you can't know much about his humorousness or otherwise. And as to—"

"O, I need make no secret of my informant," interrupted Mrs. Archer, seeing the slip she had made in challenging Grace to stand up in defence of her old lover, and eager to recover it before any harm should be done. "It was Mr. Ravensmore who told me all about him, and it was from him I learnt how witty Mr. Shafto is. Poor Charley, I think, rather fretted at what he thought his own inferiority in that way—in not having the knack of a light and sparkling way of talking about trifles. But he is perfectly free from any petty feelings of envy, and instead of sneering at or trying to detract from his rival's talent in this respect, as lots of men I know would have done, he allowed it its full measure of praise—rather more, I daresay, than it quite deserved—and only seemed to regret that he had not the same faculty. But he has a thousand others, Grace, which are worth that ten million times told."

"Yes, I know he has," said Grace, "and I don't like him a bit the less for being rather staid and serious. There is so much silly and utterly senseless flippancy in the talk that most of the young men treat one to, that it is quite a relief to find one who plainly speaks out what he thinks of things, without disguising his meaning in slang, or twisting it about in order to circumvent a laborious joke."

"You are a sensible girl, Grace," said Mrs. Archer approvingly. "I am afraid I waste a great deal more of my time than I should with the frivolous. But when I was your age I was different. Do you know, the object of the *grande passion* of my girlhood was not unlike Charley Ravensmore in that way—and indeed in many other ways, too. He was a good deal older, though."

"Major Archer, I am sure, is full of fun," observed Grace, smiling.

"Major Archer!" replied that gallant officer's dutiful spouse. "Do you suppose that no woman has ever been in love more than once, or with anybody but her husband? All girls with any heart or spirit that I have ever known form first a most romantic and utterly impracticable attachment. And when kindly Fate puts the inevitable end to that, they form another with a not quite so fresh bloom of romance on it, but infinitely pleasanter, and end—no, they don't *end*, they begin—that by marriage. No; my first love, Grace, was really a wonderful man. I have certainly never met any one like him—except, as I say, in some respects, Charles Ravensmore."

"And did he return your affection?" asked Grace.

"Return it!" exclaimed Mrs. Archer. "I don't think he ever so much as guessed I was in love with him, though I promise you I was lackadaisical enough about it. But his heart was dead, cold as the grave. Indeed, I feel almost sure it was actually buried in somebody's grave, though he never dropped a hint from which one might gather that such was the case. He was very proud and reserved."

"Is he still living?" asked Grace.

"Yes, I believe so, though I have not heard of him for ages. He got the command of the regiment—our regiment—when my father retired; he had joined it as a captain when the Mutiny broke out, because it was ordered to India, and he used to go wherever there was fighting going on. But he did not keep the command more than a month or two. He suddenly sold out, and went home, I heard, to live like an anchorite in his ancestral hall. He was a great man in his own part of the world, of very old family, and with a tremendous estate. I daresay you may have heard the name—Campion of Beechly, in ——shire."

"No, I never heard it," answered Grace carelessly.

"I don't know what there was so fascinating in him," Mrs. Archer went on. "He was certainly not handsome, at least not of the conventional type of handsomeness, though there was something very striking in his air and expression that one could not help half admiring, half fearing. His conversation was not particularly charming. Indeed, he seldom spoke, and was always grave and haughty, though excessively polite. And he certainly was not young; he can't have been less than five-and-thirty when I first knew him. But I think the peculiar attraction that he had for me was, that he seemed the personification of one of my favourite heroes, Lara: He was

'A man of loneliness and mystery,
Scarce seen to smile, and seldom heard to sigh—'

though I did hear him once sighing like a furnace, and raving, and muttering, and striking his forehead with his fist like a man gone mad; but then he never dreamt there was any one who could see or hear him. It was at the Hills—at Doonga Gully; our regiment was stationed there at Rawal Pindi, and we were spending the summer at the Gullies. Papa used to let me go about in a way which, I have since thought, was not safe, even in such a quiet place; and I often used to spend the evening with some friends, whose house was about a quarter of a mile off, and walk home by myself quite late at night. One night we had sat talking and laughing, and I had not remarked how the time was passing, till to my horror I found it was close on midnight. I hurried off in a terrible fright. My friends—they were all women—wanted to send a servant with me. But that would have been no good. What I was afraid of was, not of meeting anybody by the way—I never thought of that—but of the scolding I should get from papa; and a servant coming with me could not protect me from that. So I started off alone. To make matters worse, it was a wild, stormy night. The wind was moaning and sighing through the dark pine forest with a most weird and unearthly sound, and the mists were sweeping up the hillsides in ghostly shapes, and enveloping me every now and then in a sort of chilly winding-sheet. It was just the sort of night to meet something uncanny, and I hurried along the rough footpath, stumbling over the roots of trees, and sliding about on the slippery spines of the firs which lay strewn on the pathway. It was a wonder I did not tumble over the *khud.* Well, when I was about half-way, in a dreadfully wild and lonely bit, where a black mass of mountain and pine forest overhung the path above, and a sheer precipice descended I don't know how many hundred feet below, who should I see within a dozen paces of me but Major Campion—he was then only a major. I had heard that he was somewhere in the Gullies. He had had a bad illness, and the doctors had sent him up after his recovery. But I certainly did not count upon meeting him in such a place and on such a night. Then the attitude he was in increased my astonishment, and my terror too, for I can tell you I was in a pretty fright. He was kneeling on the path, close to the edge, overlooking the precipice, with his face and his arms both turned up towards heaven. He seemed to be in a passion of grief and despair. It struck me at once that he was going to commit suicide—perhaps praying against the temptation to do so. Well, my dear, I never professed to be a heroine; and on that occasion, when no doubt I ought to have done something heroic, I did nothing of the sort, but turned and ran away as hard as I could, and went home another way. I could not sleep a bit all night, wondering whether Major Campion's mangled remains were lying at the foot of the precipice. However, I need not have disturbed myself, for he had not committed suicide after all. Well, after that I made up my mind that he must be haunted by remorse for some dreadful crime, most likely murder; and, if so, no doubt it was some woman he had murdered. And I fell ten times deeper in love with him than I had ever been before."

Grace Hawthorn tried to laugh at this final confession. But there was something in Mrs. Archer's conjecture which called to mind the tragic fate of her own mother, and her laugh was a forced one.

"And Mr. Ravensmore resembles this Lara of yours, you say," she remarked. "Do you think he too has killed anybody? Because I am even less heroically inclined than you are; and, in that case, should decidedly prefer his directing his attentions to anybody rather than me."

"I only said they were alike in one respect," answered Mrs. Archer. "I merely mentioned Major Campion to illustrate my argument that a man may be silent and grave in his manner, and not have an atom of humour in his composition, and yet be very fascinating. Dear me, how I should like to see Campion again! When we go home in

March, I will most certainly unearth him in his lair at Beechly."

"Are you going home in March next?" asked Grace.

"Yes, my dear, I hope so, if nothing comes in the way. If my poor dear husband does not in the mean time get into a horrible muddle with his Commissariat accounts, and have to stay and be tried by court-martial. He has about as much knowledge of arithmetic as the learned pig; and I have always felt sure that sooner or later his *gomáshtas* and people will pocket a few laks of rupees under his dear old nose. And, of course, they will never give poor Nat credit for his stupidity, but will think him a preternaturally sharp scoundrel, try him for embezzlement, and send him off to the Andamans, and I shall be left a poor lone widow."

"Will you take me to England with you?" asked Grace.

"*You?*" said Mrs. Archer, surveying her guest with a queer look. "So you want to leave India, do you, Grace?"

"Yes; the truth is—I may tell *you*, dear Mrs. Archer—my position in Mrs. Steel's house has become almost unbearable. She says such things to me that, for my life, I can't help retorting, and using such words as should never be spoken by me to Mr. Steel's wife. It is very strange; though my coming out to India was chiefly Mrs. Steel's doing, she seems to have hated me from the moment we arrived, and her hatred has gone on increasing ever since. I am sure I don't know why."

"*Don't* you?" asked Mrs. Archer, who was apt to blurt out her first thoughts, without much consideration of the fitness of giving them utterance.

"Don't I?" echoed Grace, in surprise. "Why do you ask in such a tone? Do you mean to say you know of any reason for her dislike to me?"

"O no, no!" replied Mrs. Archer, reflection coming up a little behindhand, but in time to remind her that it would be scarcely fitting to mention to Grace the charitable inferences which some of the gossips of Béshuckabad had drawn from the negative result of genealogical researches made by them with a view of tracing a connection, either by consanguinity or marriage, between Mr. Steel and any family bearing the patronymic of Hawthorn. "O dear, no! I am sure I don't understand anybody hating you, Grace, for you are the dearest and most lovable girl I know. But as to taking you home with us, I shall be only too delighted, and so will Nat; that is," she added slyly, "if no other arrangements are made for you in the mean time."

From the foregoing, the reader will understand that the barometer of Ravensmore's wooing was going up in the bracing air of Guppy Tibby, and gave good promise of soon standing at "set fair." On the other hand, away below at sultry Diknugger, Shafto's weather-glass was hopelessly down at zero.

Shafto had not met Grace again after their angry parting on the morning following Bella's elopement. He had been again summoned to Gurhi Moofsid on the following day, and long ere he returned Mr. Steel and his whole party had left the district. Shafto had bitterly regretted his behaviour to Grace almost before he got home that morning—nay, before Grace had vanished from his view behind the curtain of the tent. Of course all the circumstances of the case were most suspicious, and fully justified him in all that he had said and done. Nevertheless he would willingly now have given his right hand to be able to unsay and undo them, and would accept Grace's slightest word as a full assurance of her constancy and truth, even were the evidences of her falsehood "strong as Holy Writ." But it was too late now. Grace had cast *him* off with burning wrath and withering contempt for his unworthy opinion of her. He knew, he felt, that that was an offence which she would never pardon.

He bemoaned his hard lot to Dr. Brandling, between whom and himself a wondrous confidence had sprung up since their adventures at Gurhi Moofsid. From the fact that the doctor was still *in statu quo* at Diknugger, it may be inferred that he had, though interrupted in his first endeavour, ultimately carried out his heroic resolution of eating humble pie before the Commissioner whom he had outraged. He had done so, and thereby earned an additional degree of intensity of dislike on the part of Mr. Steel, whose repugnance to his insolence was thenceforth mingled with contempt for his mean spirit. But the Commissioner was a just man and merciful; and though he felt more than ever eager to get rid of Brandling, his conscience would not allow him to send in to Government the report which must assuredly ruin the man, after he had cried *peccavi* and begged forgiveness. So he delivered a scathing censure from his own lips, which Brandling listened to with the colour going and coming in quite an alarming way beneath the tanned skin of his lean cheeks and furrowed forehead, but with meek and submissive silence; and then allowed the whole matter to pass.

Brandling and Shafto were seated one evening under the stars, in front of the humble tenement in which each enjoyed the accommodation of a room. The scorching hot winds were over, for the rains had set in nearly a month ago. But they had been insufficient, and the first showers had been followed by a long "break" of fine weather. The consequence was that all the old heat had returned, bringing with it another devil worse than itself—to wit, steaminess. Not a breath stirred the sultry air, except such as was made by the lazy swinging of a large round punkah attached to the end of a long pole, which a cooly, almost naked and quite asleep, swayed backwards and forwards behind the two men. Altogether it was an atmosphere not exhilarating, nor calculated to induce a man to make light of past errors or take a sanguine view of future prospects.

The younger gentleman lay stretched at length on a long Chinese cane-couch. The elder (such is the way of the world) sat bolt upright on a stiff-backed chair. Both were smoking short pipes. Shafto had a glass of whisky and soda-water poised on one of the arms of his couch. Brandling had a less inspiriting beverage of lime-juice and water on a little round table by his side.

The unhappy lover had just ended a full confession of the tale of his woes, of which he had on several previous occasions regaled his friend's sympathetic ear with mysteriour hints and enigmatic allusions.

"I have tried over and over again to convince myself," he concluded, "that I did perfectly right; and, indeed, when I mentally set forth my own case in plain words, it seems a strong one—unanswerable, in fact. But not a whit less do I know in my inmost heart, and acknowledge in the bitterness of my spirit a thousand times a day, that I have been a jealous ass—a miserable, suspicious fool,

'One whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe.'"

And to drown, as it were, his self-contempt, the remorseful youth clutched the tumbler, and drank a mighty draught of the whisky and soda-water.

"You are right, at least, as to the principal circumstance which aroused your suspicion," was the cold comfort he received from the doctor. "Chance happens to have made me acquainted with the cause of Miss Hawthorn and Mr. Ravensmore being together that night. I am unable to tell you what it was, for the same reason which kept her silent; it involves a most delicate secret, in which another person is concerned. But I can tell you this much, that it was quite consistent with Miss Hawthorn's perfect honesty and loyalty of faith to you. From what you tell me of that which passed between you so shortly before, it would seem that the girl nobly imperilled her own happiness and character to save those of her—in short, for the sake of others."

"I know it," said Shafto. "What exact combination of circumstances can have necessitated a meeting by night with Ravensmore, I own, is a complete puzzle to me, though I take for granted it was some infernal freak of that mischievous little devil, the Commissioner's daughter. But I do not need your assurance to convince me of Grace's truth. One might see truth itself in the clear depths of those glorious eyes as plainly as the pebbles at the bottom of a mountain brook. But I was a mole, a blind idiot!"

"Self-reproach is profitless," answered Brandling, with some impatience. "Though the words of your mouth were like a strong wind, they cannot uproot your past actions. Why should you storm merely because you have brought your loss upon yourself? If man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards, equally sure it is that trouble springs not out of the ground. Yours is but the common lot; why rave about it?"

"And I must grin and bear your rebuke for the same reason," replied Shafto, not over-pleased with this Shuhite strain of comfort; "namely, that I have brought *it* on myself also, by choosing such an unsympathetic, weather-beaten old bosom to unburden my sentimental griefs into."

"No, Shafto," answered Brandling gently, and without resenting the uncomplimentary reference to his pectoral characteristics. "Believe me, I am not unsympathetic. And if I spoke harshly, it was because I was thinking less of your trouble than of— But let that pass. To be practical —why not take leave, go to Miss Hawthorn, and make up your quarrel?"

"O, impossible, Brandling," replied Shafto, in accents of such profound dejection as might have melted the offended Grace herself, had she only been able to hear all the way from Guppy Tibby. "If you had seen the scorn with which she left me after I had the incredible meanness to utter that insinuation of her having been bought off from Ravensmore by Mrs. Steel, you would not suggest such a thing. No, no. I have lost her for ever."

"Well, you know best," said Brandling. "I have never even seen the young lady. I suppose she is not much like her friend Miss Steel, whose wrath, I should think, would not be of a very implacable kind?"

"Pooh! as different as an angel from a witch."

"Then, Shafto, my boy," said the doctor, slapping the young fellow on the shoulder, "you must take your punishment like a man. There are other things in life than love and jealousy, thank God! Let the thought that you have done ill through selfish distrust, in one crisis of life, nerve you to self-sacrifice, and warn you against presumptuous distrust of others, in those that still lie before you. Come, it is bedtime. We shall not have many more starlight conferences, Shafto. I sent in my resignation of my appointment this morning."

"Sent in your resignation!" cried Shafto, in utter amazement. "Why, has somebody left you a fortune?"

"No," replied the doctor. "When I give up my present 'half seer of otta,' as the natives say, I shall have to shift for my living as I did before I got this appointment."

"Then what on earth has induced you to resign?"

"Why, I daresay you will say I am quixotic. But the truth is, I can't stand the way the Commissioner and Baytree ill-treat those unhappy Moofsids. And as long as I remain an officer of the administration I feel myself not only *particeps criminis*, but rather the *fons et origo* of the oppression."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, Mr. Steel saw the state of things with his own eyes, yet he has tried to shut them as much as he could; he has minimised both the epidemic and the famine in all his reports to Government, and has sanctioned aid most grudgingly."

"I think you are wrong there, doctor," said Shafto. "Mr. Steel is methodical and cautious. But since his visit to Gurhi in January, I think he insisted on Baytree taking all the measures of relief that Government could be expected to undertake."

"Shafto, this miserable service is ruining you, too," exclaimed Brandling passionately. "You are becoming as cold-hearted and callous as Steel himself. For my part, I consider that the relief given has been most inadequate. And I attribute this, in a great measure at least, to pique on the Commissioner's part against me. It was I who so obstinately pressed the condition of these people on his attention, in spite of the determined opposition of Baytree. Mr. Steel took deep offence at my demeanour towards him —justly so, I quite acknowledge; I did not show him the respect which was his due; my nerves and my temper had been sorely tried, that is my only excuse. However, deeply offended he was and is. And that feeling towards the person whom he unfortunately looks upon as the champion of the Moofsids has infected his goodwill towards the Moofsids themselves. So it is my duty to put an end to this cruel prejudice in the only way I can."

"Pardon me, doctor," said Shafto, "but this really is sheer phantasy. And are you ready to give up your livelihood on such fanciful grounds? Think of the bond you gave to that worthy scoundrel Cheetun Shah. He'll foreclose the moment he hears you are out of the service."

"O, I have satisfied Cheetun Shah some time ago; he was not unreasonable. Then it is not only the general ill-treatment of these poor Moofsids only. There is now the particular and most atrocious sentence of transportation which the Commissioner has passed on the unfortunate Budmash Khan, after keeping the case hanging off and on for six or eight months, while Baytree and that sharp scoundrel of an inspector, who was sent to supersede you and Catcheside in the investigation, were manufacturing the necessary evidence, I suppose."

"I agree with you about Budmash Khan's conviction," said Shafto. "I feel pretty certain the evidence against him has been trumped up, as you say. And I even venture to think that, had the accused been any one else than Kumbukt Khan's nephew, Mr. Steel, who is clear-sighted enough when not prejudiced, would have seen through it. But, after all, to tell you the truth, there is no great harm done. If Budmash Khan is innocent of sacking old Cheetun

Shah's granaries (which I should look upon as a service to the commonwealth), he has slipped his neck out of the noose in a score of cases for which he richly deserved hanging. But anyhow, your resigning your civil surgeonship is not likely to help him."

"Perhaps not; but it may," said Brandling. "I intend, at all events, to leave no stone unturned that I have strength to lift, in order to have that gross and disgraceful perversion of justice remedied. And I cannot set about that task until I am freed from the trammels of service."

All the reply Shafto was capable of making to this last doughty resolution was to open his eyes to their widest possible extent.

"And lastly, and perhaps not least," Brandling resumed after a pause, "I have been a restless fellow all my life. I have never been able to settle down at one place or to one thing for many months at a time. And I have been chafing at this stagnant, routine, useless life ever since we broke the back of the typhus at Gurhi Moofsid, and there was no more excitement to be found in the field hospitals. Good-night."

"Poor old boy!" said Shafto to himself when Brandling had retired within his room. "There is assuredly a slate loose on his roof. But I shall miss him. He is a sterling fellow and a thorough gentleman—present apothecary and umquhile Jack Tar and Tommy Atkins though he may be. Ah, dear me! I wonder if Grace has accepted that ass Ravensmore yet? Well, if she has, the beggar deserves it: *he* has been true to her, at any rate, and he can't make her a worse husband than I—weak, poor-souled creature—should have done."

And with this consolatory reflection he shook the ashes out of his pipe, gulped down the remainder of his "peg," and turned in too.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RAVENSMORE PROVES THAT THERE ARE OTHER SLIPS THAN BETWEEN THE CUP AND THE LIP.

THE relations between Mrs. Steel and Grace Hawthorn had, as the latter hinted to Mrs. Archer, been rapidly becoming more and more tightly strained; and Grace's experienced ally felt sure that they must soon snap. She was therefore only mildly surprised one evening, when she had happened by a rare chance to dine at home and alone, and was yawning over a novel, at seeing Grace burst into the room, trembling from head to foot, and with her lips, ordinarily so rosy, as white as paper.

In a voice half choked with agitation, Grace begged her friend to allow her to remain that night in her house, for she never again would or could sleep under the same roof with Mrs. Steel.

"Certainly, my dear," answered Mrs. Archer placidly; "your bed is all ready. There, sit down and compose yourself, my poor child. Drink that," and she poured Grace out a glass of sherry.

Grace did not drink the wine, but she sat down, and after a time did compose herself sufficiently to give Mrs. Archer an incoherent and spasmodic explanation of her sudden appearance. Mrs. Archer good-naturedly suppressed whatever curiosity she might have felt on the subject, and rather urged Grace to be silent. It would be plenty of time, she said, to tell her all about it in the morning. What Grace wanted now was to get to bed and have a good sleep. But Grace was much too upset to profit by, or indeed to hear, this sound advice. For some time her broken sentences did not enlighten her hearer very much as to the particular occasion which had brought matters between Grace and Mrs. Steel to a climax. All she could gather was that there had been a grand quarrel, at the root of which lay, as had not unfrequently happened before, some words or deeds of that inveterate mischief-maker, Bella;

that Mrs. Steel seemed to have lost control over her temper, and cast off the restraints of decency more completely than usual; and that Grace herself on her part had entirely forgotten—what had indeed been growing fainter and fainter in her memory ever since they had been at the Hills—that excellent precept of Solomon which she had been wont to observe in her intercourse with Mrs. Steel. But at last the *teterrima causa* of the final break came out.

"O! you don't know what that woman said—what she dared to call—" gasped Grace. "I can't tell you."

"Don't try, darling," said Mrs. Archer soothingly, as she leant over the palpitating girl, with one arm round her waist, and the other hand caressingly smoothing her dark locks. "I can imagine the language which Mrs. Steel would use, quite accurately enough for all practical purposes."

"Do you remember," Grace went on, "one day, when I said I could not understand why she hated me so, you said, 'Can't you?' in such a significant way that I was quite surprised—I could not even guess what you meant? But—I know now—*she has told me*."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Archer, quite taken off her guard. "You don't mean to say that she said *that* to you—and her own daughter standing by!"

"Yes, she did," replied Grace. And then burst into a paroxysm of tears, which was a great relief.

Mrs. Steel repented of the incautious revelation which she had let drop in the violence of her passion, almost the moment she had uttered it. And Grace was very quickly followed to the Brownie's Ring by a letter written in the most affectionate terms, imploring her to return home and prevent a scandal. Whether Mrs. Steel really believed—either wholly or only half—in the truth of what she had told Grace, it would be impossible to say. But whether she did so or not, one thing she had felt perfectly certain of from the very moment she observed her husband's strange reception of Grace on their landing in India, namely, that his interest in Grace had its origin in a deep and unforgotten attachment to Grace's mother. And jealousy was therefore the source of the vehement and ever-growing hatred which she felt towards the girl.

If Mr. Steel should hear of the allegation which had driven Grace from his house—as hear he assuredly must unless Grace would consent to return—Mrs. Steel well knew that his wrath would be very terrible. She was wont constantly, as the reader has had plenty of opportunity to observe, to annoy her husband with irritating complaints and insinuations. Her experience had taught her that she might go to great lengths in the security of Mr. Steel's firm command over his temper. But experience had also taught her a lesson long years ago—in those early days of their married life, when Mrs. Steel had been as much lighter in character as in corporeal bulk—that if the degree of pressure were once passed, beyond which her husband's self-restraint was not strong enough to bear the strain, the giving way was like the bursting of the dam of some vast reservoir, or the cutting of a Dutch dike. That his temper would not bear the strain of hearing that his wife had informed his ward—whether truly or falsely it was of little matter—that he was bound to her by a stronger tie than that of benevolence, there could be no doubt whatever. Therefore Mrs. Steel would have given a great deal to have left those rash words unsaid; and having said them, was ready to eat very humble pie, if haply that diet might prove an antidote to the mischief she had caused.

But her overtures were quite in vain. Grace peremptorily refused to entertain them. And when they were renewed more earnestly the following day, all hope of escaping the consequence of her indiscretion was abruptly cut off by an intimation from Miss Hawthorn that she had already written and posted a letter to Mr. Steel, telling him how and why she had left his house, and vowing never to return to it.

Mrs. Archer did not at all regret the *éclaircissement* which had brought Grace under her wing. Mrs. Steel's desperate efforts to get the girl back added zest to the pleasure with which the amiable hostess extended the shelter of her pretty roof to her young friend. Besides, was not this the crowning opportunity for accomplishing a far grander triumph, and inflicting a yet bitterer defeat on her enemy? She lost no time, we may be sure, in telling Ravensmore that now or never was his time to make Grace his own.

Not to make a long story of it, the occasion for the young secretary was made on the second day after Miss Hawthorn's arrival at the Brownie's Ring, which was Sunday. The weather being lovely, Mrs. Archer proposed that instead of returning straight home from church, they should walk round by a certain very pretty path, which crossed, amongst other picturesque obstacles, a pellucid mountain stream, over which there was no bridge, but only stepping-stones. Mrs. Archer went on in front in her *jompon*—she was not much inclined to walking and suchlike athletic exercises—with a gentleman of the congregation whom she had selected to be her escort, and who was doubly glad, no doubt, to accept the honour,—first, for the pleasure to be derived from Mrs. Archer's society, which few men thought lightly of; but secondly, and more particularly on this present occasion, in the hope of extracting from her some account of the reasons which had led to Miss Hawthorn's very sudden visit to her—an event that in all probability formed the sole topic of conversation amongst the sundry groups of gossips gathered round the church-door that morning. Ravensmore and Grace, stopping now and then to look at the glorious view, insensibly lingered some distance behind. The path was very unfrequented at that time, it being indeed the general lunch-hour, and they met not a soul except two old women carrying panniers of pears on their backs from "the interior."

Ravensmore seized the opportunity, and renewed his declaration of love with the deep, sober earnestness which was characteristic of him.

"Mr. Ravensmore," said Grace, after she had made one or two previous vain efforts to interrupt him, "if even I were ready to return the affection—the noble and generous affection for me which you profess, and for which, believe me, I am truly and deeply grateful—I could not accept your offer. You belong to a family—you have near relations in a rank in life where birth is much considered. My birth was—was *very* humble, and *very* unfortunate. I cannot tell you more than that, but it is due to you that you should know so much. Ask Mrs. Archer; tell her that I desired her to tell you what I cannot tell you myself. But it is sufficient that this puts an obstacle between us, were there no other, which is quite impassable."

"I know all about—I know, at any rate, all I wish to know about your birth," said Ravensmore impetuously. "I am nephew of a peer, as you say, but I am independent both of him and my whole family. But believe me, you will be received by them as my wife, and in your own incomparable character, with all the respect and affection you could wish. Don't, I implore you, let considerations of that sort come in the way of my happiness. I promise you, if you like, a letter of welcome from my uncle himself, which shall be as warm as you could desire, before we are married. Were I the heir to the title, birth and family might have to be thought of; but, thank Heaven! there are a round dozen of healthy cousins between me and that thraldom. No; I have an independent and, I will venture to boast, no mean career before me. Will you, Miss Hawthorn, will you, Grace, consent to share—to adorn—to cheer, and to sanctify it?"

Just at this critical moment they reached the margin of the brook. Ravensmore, with the ready faculty which had been quickened in the diplomatic atmosphere of the Mâ Bâp Secretariat office, saw and seized the advantage of the situation. He stepped lightly down on to the slippery and wobbly stepping-stones, and held out his hand, as if to assist Grace to cross. She took his hand; but he, instead of moving so as to allow her to pass over, stood right before her, completely blocking the way, and looking up in her face as she stood on the ledge prepared to descend.

"I swear I will not leave this stone," he said, "till you consent! O Grace, I know I am utterly unworthy of the gift I beg; but that seems nothing to me. In the case of any other woman I might feel that I want advantages which others possess; but with you there is no room for any such diffidence. The best of us is so infinitely unworthy of you that a few petty degrees of inferiority can be of no account whatever. But in honest true love and devotion I swear you will find none to match me, not if you searched the wide world through; and is that to go for nothing?"

Grace stood perfectly still, and left her hand in his. She stood, not looking at him, but with her face turned aside towards a dip in the encircling hills, through which a vista of the distant view was seen. With a dreamy gaze, her eyes seemed to sweep over the intervening space, until they rested on a pleasant leafy knoll just opposite, which was warm and bright in the genial beams of the noonday sun; but thence again straining onward, it passed and fixed upon the still and ghostly face of the snow-capped mountain, which reared its head in dismal majesty in the far distance. She scarcely listened to Ravensmore's eager words. Her thoughts were ranging like her glance—sweeping the past, striving wildly and vainly to scan the future. The humiliations, the barren yearnings for warm living love and sympathy, which had clouded her life—the stain on her birth, the worse than dependence of her lot—clamoured at the door of memory. On the other side appeared the radiant vision of love, honour, perfect trust, which Ravensmore's earnest words presented. But—but there was something beyond, an unsubstantial but a chilling phantom—the vague dread lest the ghost of a smothered love might not be laid, but might come back to haunt her hereafter "in the dread unhappy night," should she give her hand to this man now before her, worthy and true as he was, while she knew that her heart was another's.

She sighed—a scarcely audible, but a long sigh. Could the faint breath of that suspiration have been wafted through the clear air as far as Diknugger, and mingled with the warm current from the punkah which swung creaking above

Shafto's head, as he sat perspiring in his shirt-sleeves, it might doubtless have caused him to shiver, as one is popularly supposed to do when a goose walks over one's grave. For that sigh was heaved to lift his image for ever from Grace Hawthorn's heart. She slowly, lingeringly withdrew her eyes from their wistful gaze at the snowy hill, to bend them half tenderly, half regretfully on Ravensmore's upturned face. But just as their orbit had almost come round to the point at which their glance would have met his, it was suddenly arrested. All that was sentimental in their expression fled in an instant, and they became fixed in a stare of alarm right over Ravensmore's head. She snatched her hand from his and stepped back, while at the same moment a deep voice just behind him uttered in an agitated tone the ejaculation, "Good God!"

Ravensmore, startled by the sound, turned hastily round. There stood a tall man, who had evidently approached the brook by the winding and overgrown path which led down to it on the other side, unperceived and unperceiving until he had reached its margin. His attitude, no less than his exclamation, betokened unaccountable agitation. With one hand he was clutching, as if to save himself from falling, a projection of the rock from behind which the path emerged, while the other was stretched out before him.

"Confound the fellow!" was the thought which flashed through Ravensmore's mind. "His sense of propriety must be deuced acute, if the mere sight of a man holding a girl's hand sends him into an epileptic fit."

This thought, I say advisedly, must have *flashed* through Ravensmore's mind; for had it not been extremely rapid in its passage, it must have been cut off half-way. Within half a second of his catching sight of the intruder, the youth had something still more urgent to think about. Loose conical-topped stepping-stones are not the things to perform pirouettes upon. Ravensmore, in turning so hastily round, lost his balance. There was a struggle, a flounder, a splash; and the rash youth, who had so airily sworn not to move from his standing-place until his mistress should consent to his suit, was sprawling on his back in the brook—unanswered!

The stranger, recovering himself, hastened to repair as far as possible the damage which his abrupt and inopportune appearance had caused, by dashing into the water and helping Ravensmore to rise. That smart young official, naturally incensed at the ridiculous figure he had been made to cut at what should have been the supreme moment of his life, at first rudely pushed aside the proffered assistance, and attempted to spring lightly to his feet; but he failed, and had in the end to be beholden to the intruder's support, for he found that he had severely sprained his ankle, and could not put his right foot to the ground.

Grace had now leisure to take more note of the stranger's appearance than she had been able to do in the first moment of horror at being caught by any one in such a very delicate situation. She recognised him as a person whom she had once before had a passing glance at, but whose striking appearance had then made a considerable impression upon her. In short, it was Dr. Brandling, whom it may be remembered the ladies had met when they drove into the station of Diknugger. Ravensmore the doctor had seen there once or twice.

Brandling at once set about doing what he could to relieve Ravensmore's pain, and at the same time apologised for the awkwardness of his startling exclamation.

"The truth is," he said, "I was extremely startled myself by a very striking resemblance which the young lady bears to a person—to a dear friend who has long been dead. Coming so abruptly upon you, and unexpectedly finding myself face to face with this remarkable likeness, I was completely thrown off my guard. I cannot sufficiently express my regret at the accident which my foolish want of self-control has occasioned you."

Grace had ere this, with ready presence of mind, not unstimulated perhaps by eagerness to escape from a situation which had been most embarrassing to her in the uncertain state of her mind, or rather of her heart, from first to last, fled with the speed of Atalanta up the path towards the Brownie's Ring to procure Mrs. Archer's jompon for her disabled lover. As she tripped lightly and safely across the slippery stepping-stones, without any need of assistance, treading as firmly and carelessly as if she had been on a high road, there was something in her movements which appeared to reëxcite still more strongly in Dr. Brandling's memory or imagination the effect produced by her first motionless appearance. He looked up from his work on Ravensmore's foot, and followed her till she vanished from view with a strangely wistful gaze.

"May I ask," he said to Ravensmore, as the latter sat on a ledge of rock awaiting the arrival of the jompon—"may I ask what is that young lady's name?"

(It may be necessary to remind the reader that when he had met the ladies at Diknugger, Grace had been seated on the front seat of the carriage, and he had therefore not seen her face on that occasion.)

"Miss Hawthorn," replied Ravensmore.

"Miss Hawthorn? Indeed! Mr. Steel's ward?" said the doctor; and his thoughts at once reverted to the young friend whom he had left at Diknugger, and to whose previously not hopeful case the attitude in which he had found his rival and the lady boded indeed utter despair.

Either the bearers of Mrs. Archer's jompon had been unwontedly active that day, or (what is a less improbable supposition) Grace and Ravensmore had lingered on their way more often and longer than they had thought. At any rate, Grace, to her surprise, did not overtake her hostess till she arrived panting in the verandah of the Brownie's Ring. She briefly told what had happened—that is, it must be understood, as much of what had happened as she deemed it necessary for Mrs. Archer to know—and hurried back with the jompon.

Mrs. Archer expressed the most lively sympathy with Ravensmore's misfortune, but did not propose to accompany Grace to the scene of the disaster, at the cost of having to walk back up the steep hill. Perhaps, too, she thought that the young man might be very well content to spare her tender care and gentle sympathy on his way homewards, so long as he enjoyed those of so efficient a substitute as Grace Hawthorn.

Ravensmore was safely conveyed to his house, where he remained laid up for the next week. Dr. Brandling saw him safely home, but Grace accompanied the jompon a very small portion of the way.

Dr. Brandling's presence in Guppy Tibby may be briefly accounted for. He had resigned his post in the public service for the reasons which he explained to Shafto, and had come to the summer head-quarters of the Mâ Bâp Provinces Government to lay the hard case of his *protégé*, Budmash Khan, before Sir Duncan MacTullub, the Lieutenant-Governor. He had arrived the day before, and was taking a walk along the most unfrequented road he could find, when he so unluckily encountered our pair of lovers.

He happened to meet Miss Hawthorn the next day also —altogether accidentally on his part, I will not take it upon me to say. He inquired after her young friend's injured ankle, and then asked if he might accompany Grace in her walk. This latter request rather astonished her. But she did not exactly know how to refuse; and besides, she had taken a great fancy to the doctor's fine quixotic countenance and bearing, from the time she first saw him at Diknugger. So she murmured something, which he at any rate did not take as a denial; and the tall, quaint, stiff, and solemn-looking elderly gentleman, and the lithe and graceful girl, set off side by side.

It was a pleasant bracing morning, and they had a long walk, right round the big hill which towers over the picturesque sanatorium of Guppy Tibby in a good-natured protecting sort of way. They were good friends before they had walked a mile; and by the time they were half-way round the hill, had made considerable progress in an interchange of confidences. Grace had often heard of the doctor, and always in favourable terms, from Shafto. And he was drawn towards her by some subtle influence, which hardly allowed him to take his eyes from her face. He told her all about his respectable client, Budmash Khan, and how he was resolved never to rest until he should "unthread the rude eye" of the injustice perpetrated on that injured innocent. She warmly admired his self-sacrifice in giving up his appointment in order to be free to devote his efforts to the disinterested task he had undertaken. But here he promptly checked her, and disclaimed all credit of that kind.

"To tell you the truth," he said, in a penitential tone of voice, "my conscience has very plainly told me that it is quite otherwise. In throwing up my appointment at Diknugger, I have actually deserted a post, where I was doing useful work in a humble way; but it was—ever since the epidemic was got under—work of a routine, unexciting kind, which my restless spirit chafed at. I shall now return to the wandering, unsettled, good-for-nothing life that I have always been most prone to. And there is even an uncomfortable consciousness, which I cannot get rid of from my mind, that what I have persuaded myself to be pure zeal on behalf of one cruelly wronged is, as a matter of fact, a welcome excuse to me for escaping an irksome duty."

In return for these confidences about himself, he learnt from Grace—though probably she would have been immensely surprised had she been told so—much regarding her feeling towards Shafto. This he did not by questioning her, but by exactly the reverse process, namely, by giving her the fullest replies to sundry little ingeniously roundabout queries which she threw out, in the hope of catching some stray allusion to her discarded lover. But when Brandling, as they neared the end of their walk, encouraged by the manifest interest which his companion showed in whatever he told her in which Shafto's name occurred, was about to tread on delicate ground, and began to preface what he had to say by telling her that the young man had confided his secret to him, she stopped him at once, and in such a peremptory manner as there was no gainsaying. Nor did their conversation resume its former unembarrassed tone again until they parted.

The doctor held her hand for a moment ere he left her at the rustic gate of the Brownie's Ring.

"Thank you," he said, with the strange wistful gaze into her face before noticed, which brought the ever-ready blush into Grace's cheeks; "thank you for a pleasure such as it is many, many long years since I have enjoyed. I shall not stay here more than two days, but I should like to see you again before I leave—if I shall not be troublesome. May I call and pay my respects to Mrs. Archer?"

Grace replied that she was sure Mrs. Archer would be glad to see him. And so they parted.

CHAPTER XIX.

FATHER AND CHILD.

THE moment Mr. Steel got Grace's letter, telling him of her departure from his wife's house, and the cause, and many other things which it is not essential to set down here, he hurried up to Guppy Tibby. Of his interview with his wife, to whom he of course first went, it is also unnecessary to give any account. From his wife's house he came over to Mrs. Archer's, and fortunately found the mistress thereof out, and Grace at home.

He upbraided his ward for the ingratitude involved in her belief in a charge so foully injurious to him. She knew that her father had been a treacherous, cold-hearted villain; and yet, after a lifelong experience of her benefactor's generosity towards her, she was ready to attribute that character to him. The reproach was telling and unanswerable; but it undoubtedly lost some of its force, from the circumstance that Grace had only believed the accusation on the evidence of the wife of the accused's own bosom. Mr. Steel perhaps felt this, and was less trenchant in his eloquence than he might otherwise have been.

"But after this miserable occurrence," he concluded, "two things are now absolutely unavoidable. One is, that you can no longer be Mrs. Steel's guest. You must come back with me to Béshuckabad, and before her return thither you must sail for England. The other is, that I must tell, and you must hear, the particulars of the dark story of your mother's desertion and death, which I had vainly hoped might have been for ever buried in oblivion. This last I will do now and here. The narrative must harrow your feelings; the recalling of it will destroy my peace of mind for many a day to come. But your own act has made it necessary. You must listen to the story now with what composure you can muster; and the sooner it is over the better.

"I told you that I loved your mother, and that she returned my affection. That she did so really, that she was only drawn aside from an honest and pure attachment to me—the friend of her childhood, and the early object of her ripening affections—by what I can only suppose to have been a temporary madness, there can be no shadow of doubt. She *was*, however, for a time drawn aside by a passion for your father, who wandered as an idle stroller into the secluded neighbourhood in which she lived. What brought him there I know not. But it is not unlikely that the heartless ruffian was in the habit, like his master, Satan, of going to and fro on the earth, seeking whom he might devour, to feed his greedy passions.

"Mary—that is, your mother—long held clandestine intercourse with this man before I discovered it. Unfortunately I had had a quarrel with her father, a man of harsh manners and violent temper, which compelled me also to meet her in secret. I was besides only at home for brief intervals during my vacations. And altogether at the time of her infatuation for this Pearson—that was the false name he went by—I saw her but seldom. Most unhappily, during that time she drank the poisoned cup of her insane folly and sin to the dregs. When I discovered her intrigue with Pearson, it was too late. His villainous end was accomplished. He was only eager to shake her off.

"I had received a hint which aroused my suspicion, and I surprised them at one of their clandestine meetings. I attacked the scoundrel, and—and—well, we fought until he ran away.

"I was, as you may suppose, as highly incensed against your poor mother at the time as against her betrayer. I returned home, vowing never to see her again. But I think it was two or three days after my encounter with Pearson, I received that letter from her, which I gave to you some months ago, appealing piteously for my help, and conjuring me, by the memory of our old love, to see her once more. At first, in my just anger, I resolved to refuse; but after a severe mental struggle, I changed my mind, and decided that I should not be justified, ill as I had been used by her, in rejecting an appeal made in such solemn, such despairing terms. I promised to meet her; would to God that I— But enough! I must tell this story in curt, matter-of-fact language, or I shall never be able to tell it at all.

"I went to the place and at the hour appointed by her. It was a fitting scene for an interview that was to be concerned with the burial of dead hopes and the birth of ghastly phantoms of despair. It was in the graveyard, and at night.

"While I waited for her I saw a creature, whom I recognised, stealthily approach the place. It was an old hag, who kept a sort of beer-shop in the neighbourhood, at which I had discovered that Pearson used to take up his quarters. The woman entered the churchyard, appeared to hide something in the grass near a gravestone, and hurried away. I naturally went to the spot to see what she had deposited, and found a letter, which, by the light of a dark lantern I had with me, I saw was addressed to Mary Lee. I had no doubt it was from Pearson; and I must confess that the discovery that she still corresponded with him inflamed my anger against her.

"As soon as she arrived I delivered her the note. She read it eagerly, and the effect was terrible. With a low wail of anguish she fell lifeless to the earth. In a moment all my righteous indignation was dissipated by the sight of her agony, by her ashy cheeks and bloodless lips. I raised her in my arms; I had never loved her so wildly, so entirely, as I did at that moment. Her inconstancy, her deception, Pearson, all were forgotten; and I thought only of clutching that beautiful pale form to my bosom, and holding it there for ever.

"She slowly recovered her consciousness. I do not know what I said, nor would it avail to repeat my wild utterances even if I could recall them; and I might as well try to recall a hurricane. But then I learnt from her, what I solemnly declare I had not even suspected before, the whole of the terrible truth. In the extremity of her distraction her words were incoherent and hardly intelligible. But I understood this much—that Pearson had prevailed with her by means of a solemn promise of marriage, but that he had kept postponing the fulfilment of his promise on the excuse that, should his father suddenly discover that he had married a girl of Mary Lee's position in life, he would assuredly disinherit him, which would be equally ruinous, as he argued, to himself and his wife. For I must tell you that this fellow, whose brutal profligacy and shameless disregard of honour or honesty might have disgraced the lowest slum in Seven Dials, was the descendant and heir of an ancient and wealthy family. And this cowardly betrayer of a helpless girl—I may say of a mere child—has since then been belauded for his gallantry as a soldier. Your father, Grace, is a man of no undistinguished name, and it is best that at last you should hear it. His name is Colonel Campion, and he is the possessor—"

"Colonel Campion!" exclaimed Grace. "Not the Colonel Campion who was in the 25th Hussars?"

"The same. But what do you know of him?"

"It was the regiment which Mrs. Archer's father commanded. She knew him well before her marriage, and was speaking of him to me only the other day."

"Well, let me proceed with my narrative. He had, as I have said, sworn to marry her, but had evaded his promises.

At the very interview between them which I had interrupted a few days before, Mary had pressed him more earnestly than ever to fulfil it, passionately imploring him to save her character ere it was too late; and he, driven into a corner by her pertinacity, had consented to make her his wife within some short period—a week, I think, or some such space. But in order to make a last effort to save them from the beggary in which their marriage, followed, as it was almost sure to be, by his disinheritance, was most likely to involve them, he was first to go to his home and beg the intercession of his mother in Mary's behalf. I could not doubt for a moment that all this was a mere shallow pretence to get away. But Mary, poor girl, had believed or half believed him. She waited eagerly for his return, or for a letter which they had arranged should be delivered by the old woman of the beer-shop in the manner I had witnessed. But when none came, in her desperation she had sent for me. In what manner she had proposed to herself that I could help her, whether by pursuing her betrayer to his home or how, I do not know; very likely at the time she summoned me she did not know herself. As it happened, accident intervened to upset her plans, whatever they may have been. The expected letter came almost at the moment of our meeting, and my first act was to place it in her hands.

"I took up the letter from the ground, where it had fallen from her lifeless hand, and read it. It was what might have been expected—a farewell, a dismissal, couched in language of brutal levity. And there was an exhortation to 'patience'—*patience*, forsooth, in *her* strait! In short, it was a letter worthy of the man. The very paper, a crumpled scrap picked up at a roadside inn, and the writing, scrawled and blotted, proved how lightly he thought of the ruin he had caused. He had hardly been able to spare time to waste on these few hurried contemptuous words of parting; and had, indeed, only done so while he was kept waiting for an unpunctual stage-coach, which was to carry him on his journey, doubtless in pursuit of some new intrigue that had still the zest of fresh-ness, which this had lost. Stay—I kept the letter, and have it now with me. All connection, all interest for me with this miserable story now ends. After you leave me, a few weeks hence, I pray Heaven that I may be able to blot out, once and for ever, from my thoughts and my memory, all trace and record of a series of crimes and misfortunes of which, though others were the authors, I have tasted a large share of the bitter fruits. I will no longer retain one memorial of them; and now that you have learnt who your father is, it is right that I should deliver this self-written record of his own baseness into your hands."

As Mr. Steel spoke he took from his pocket-book a mean and paltry scrap of flimsy, bescribbled paper. At the first glance it looked more like a washerwoman's account than a missive destined to lead to such tragic consequences. Grace took it mechanically from Mr. Steel's hand.

"You had better read it," he said. "I will proceed with my narrative when you have finished."

She obeyed. The letter ran as follows:

"My Darling,—I had no time to write from home, and am just snatching a few minutes while waiting at the inn here for the coach which is to carry me the first stage on my journey to the Continent.

"The gods are certainly against us. Fancy my disgust on reaching the Hall to find my mother absent, and my father in the torments of gout and the very devil of a temper. Of course I said nothing about our marriage. It would have been sheer madness. Worse! it would have been nothing short of parricide, as he would certainly have died of rage and apoplexy—but not so suddenly as not to have time to alter his will first. So you yourself must admit that there is nothing for it but to give up my heart's darling, however hard the struggle may be. The chance of obtaining my parents' consent I always looked upon as a forlorn hope, and without it we can look forward to nothing but penury.

But there is no controlling fate, Mary, and we must both of us just grin and bear our lot.

"By the bye, my lawyer uncle is staying at the Hall. We dined together alone, and I asked some fishing questions. I much fear we bungled that little business at ——, and it was quite worthless. Here comes the coach. Good-bye, pet. Let us hope for better times some day, though the present is so gloomy. And as to what happened at ——, why, as the Scotch song says, 'If it wasna' weel bobbit, we'll bob it again,' one of these days.—J. C."

"When your mother left me to return to her father's house that night," said Mr. Steel, resuming his story, "I believed that she had consented to fly—in short, to the offer of marriage which, notwithstanding all that had passed, I again made her; but I was deceived. Next morning I learnt that she had gone—alone.

"I was true to her, Grace, to the last. None can ever question that. I gave up all thoughts of myself and of my own interests, and devoted all my time and my energies to a vain pursuit, a fruitless search for her. I left Haileybury, where I was then a student. I was lost to my friends. And for nearly a year I wandered and searched and inquired, but without, or almost without, finding the slightest clue.

"During this time I need not say that Campion made not an effort to discover what had become of his victim. In all probability he never gave a thought to her fate, and very likely did not even know that she had fled from her father's house. It would seem that at this period he had become surfeited with such triumphs as he had gained over this poor girl, and turned himself to the acquisition of those of another kind, in which he was destined equally to distinguish himself. Between your mother's flight and her return, our troops had invaded the Crimea, and the battle of Balaclava had been fought. Campion was engaged in it, and was, I believe, wounded in the famous charge of the Light Brigade.

"At last—it is needless to tell you how—I got upon the track of her whom I sought. It is equally needless, and would only add useless pangs to the suffering with which you must hear this story, to tell you how your mother had subsisted, and what varied hardships she had endured. I traced her down to a mean cottage in a great manufacturing town, where for some months before she had succeeded in obtaining some kind of work. But I did not find *her* there, Grace; I only found you. Her I never saw again after I parted with her that night in the churchyard.

"When I got to this cottage I found you, an infant scarce a month old, in charge of the good woman with whom your mother lodged. She had gone away, the woman told me, to seek help for her child from her friends. She had been very reserved, and the woman had no idea to what place she had gone.

"I set off immediately to my grandfather's house, which was in the neighbourhood of Mr. Lee's. I arrived thither at night, and intended to go over to Slagby the next morning. But on the next morning, before I could set out, came the shocking news of your mother's death, which had taken place the afternoon before. I do not know how much you have heard of the circumstances of that awful event. There was, and is still, some mystery about it. She had not been, so far as the villagers of Slagby or the servants and people about the Parsonage knew, to her father's house. From Mr. Lee himself no information on this subject could be obtained; for the first shock of the news of his daughter's death brought on a stroke of paralysis, from which he never again recovered either sense or speech. But Campion had been seen with her, on the spot from whence she fell into the river, shortly before she did so. And he was seen also to treat her with characteristic brutality, shaking her roughly from him, and throwing her to the ground, when she clung to him in the agony of her despair. But what had brought him back to the neighbourhood of Slagby, and how they had happened to be together at that particular spot, I never could find out. He had returned from the Crimea shortly before, probably on account of his wound. And there would have been nothing surprising in a man so callous as he having come again to pay a visit to the gentleman in the neighbourhood with whom, as I afterwards ascertained, he had been staying when he first, by evil chance, saw Mary Lee. But this was not the case. I was unable to make inquiries on these points at the time, as I myself too had fallen ill; so at the official investigation even the identity of the man, who had been seen in her company just before her death, was not discovered. But some weeks afterwards I made inquiry, and amongst other things learnt that Campion had not been to stay with the gentleman I have alluded to, but that he had arrived on the morning of the fatal day at his old lodgings at the beer-shop, which he had occupied while he had been engaged in his nefarious intrigue. I extorted this with difficulty from the old hag who kept it, and who told me also that he had left the house again within a few minutes of his arrival, and had never returned. For his not returning to the inn indeed there was a very obvious reason, for as he approached it he must have heard from the idlers who hung about the door, that the lifeless body of his victim lay stretched within ; and even *he* may be supposed to have shrunk with horror from looking on what he had done.

"No more remains to be told. I took charge of you, and placed you at first under the care of the good soul whom you cannot have forgotten as the earliest friend you knew, and whose name you bear. The wretch Campion I have never met but on that occasion when we fought, and I pray Heaven I never may."

It is needless to say how deeply this narration affected Grace. She had far from recovered her composure when Mrs. Archer returned home. The Commissioner informed that lady that Miss Hawthorn would go back with him the next morning to Béshuckabad. Mrs. Archer was very averse to this arrangement, and begged that Grace might remain her guest until she herself went to England, and then go home with her. But Mr. Steel was obdurate, and Grace too showed a willing concurrence in his proposal. Perhaps she did this because she was in duty bound to obey her benefactor, the more so after the pain which she had just so gratuitously caused him. Perhaps also she was not anxious to be called upon for her deferred reply to the question which Ravensmore's accident had left unanswered, and which would assuredly be repeated the moment the young secretary was able to hobble across to the Brownie's Ring, if she should then be found there. Mrs. Archer was not a little piqued at her guest's readiness to leave her. She received Grace's protestations that she would never forget her kindness very coldly, and she was barely civil in her leave-taking of Mr. Steel, when he, after mentioning the hour next morning at which the dooly would be at the door for Grace, got up to return to his own house.

At this very moment a servant brought in a visiting card. Mrs. Archer took it from the tray, and looking at the name, said, by no means graciously, "Dr. J. Brandling; who on earth is he? Say I am not at home."

The servant left the room, but apparently mistook the order. Indeed, the good-natured Mrs. Archer was not by any means in the habit of denying herself to visitors of all sorts and degrees whatever, and so there is the less blame to the bearer for having misapprehended so unwonted a command. So just as Mr. Steel had taken up his hat and gloves, and was walking towards the door, the curtain was again drawn aside, and in stepped the gaunt figure of the late civil surgeon of Diknugger.

"Goodness gracious!" ejaculated Mrs. Archer, stepping back in amazement. "Colonel Campion! who ever dreamt of seeing *you* here?"

"Colonel Campion!" repeated Mr. Steel, also recoiling in utter astonishment. And then, after glancing at Mrs. Archer to make sure that it was actually to Brandling that she applied the name, he fixed a keen gaze on the latter's face, while a dark frown settled on his brow. "Ay," he said, in a low grating tone, after so looking at him for a few seconds, "I recognise you at last. I thought from the moment I saw you there was something familiar to my memory in that insolent countenance. You ruffianly scoundrel! So you have once more dared to masquerade before me under a false name!"

This startling address naturally took Dr. Brandling somewhat aback. It is true that he was aware he did not stand high in the Commissioner's good graces; still, he hardly expected such a greeting as this on their casually meeting each other in the course of a morning call in a lady's drawing-room. There was more of amazement than of anger in his reply, which assumed the interrogative form.

"What do you mean, sir? Are you mad? or do you know where you are, or whom you are speaking to?"

"Whom I am speaking to?" repeated Steel. "Why, true; that is not altogether an unreasonable inquiry in the case of a man with so many aliases as you seem to have at command."

"Cease this insolence, sir," said Brandling, his grim visage assuming an ominously lowering look. "And as to my assuming a false name, I have done no such thing. I have as good a right to the name of Brandling, under which you have known me, as I have to that of Campion, which this lady's recollection now accidentally reveals to you. The first I was born to; the second was assumed by my father when he inherited the estates of the Campion family. When I thought fit to adopt a new profession I did no wrong to society in dropping the latter name, which could only have been an encumbrance to my usefulness. And now, sir, that I have given the only explanation which you or anybody else can by any possibility claim a right to require, you will have the goodness instantly to—"

"And pray," interrupted Steel, with a most insulting sneer, "is *Pearson* also included in the convenient catalogue of surnames which, it would appear, is preserved in your family as a kind of heirloom?"

> "The bold Colonel's brow then changed, I trow,
> From high blood-red to pale."

He started as if struck, and in his turn scanned his adversary with a searching look from head to foot, and on him, too, recognition gradually dawned, but with less certainty than in Mr. Steel's case.

"You, then," he said half inquiringly, "are identical with that vain and meddling youth (who, however, I thought was called Goldsworth, or some such name), whose impertinence I was once compelled to chastise."

"My grandfather's name was Crovesworth," replied Steel, on whose face the last word called up a flush of shame and rage. "But it must have been your own practice which led you into the mistake of supposing that I also bore it. I never did bear it, sir. The fact is, *I* never undertook any such villainy as necessitated my juggling with the names of my relations."

Brandling's self-control—never a very potent factor in his composition—quite gave way at this.

"You lying blackguard!" he shouted, and took two mighty strides forward, as if bent upon renewing that personal encounter which had been interrupted about a quarter of a century before. But, happily for Mrs. Archer's elegant drawing-room furniture, this intention was frustrated by the timely interposition of the alarmed proprietress thereof. The chivalrous doctor, thus recalled to his senses and the consciousness of the presence of the ladies, stepped back again in confusion.

Mrs. Archer had been so astonished at such an extraordinary interchange of compliments in her drawing-room, and this scene of recognition had moreover passed so rapidly, that she had not until now been able to interfere; while Grace, who had sunk down on a chair when Colonel Campion's name was first uttered, sat staring with a half-wild, half-stupefied gaze at the man who had been so suddenly revealed to her as her father—the betrayer and, morally, the murderer of her mother. Mrs. Archer now came forward and interposed between the two men. She was a plucky woman, who knew how to assert herself and uphold the respect due to her drawing-room, even amid the storm of lowering frowns, and flashing eyes, and thundering threats.

"Whatever is the meaning of this?" she said. "Mr. Steel, you seem to have some mysterious quarrel with my old friend, Colonel Campion. But, please, remember that a lady's house is not the place for men to fight in."

This unlucky reference to fighting recalled to the Commissioner's mind that allusion to "chastisement," and stung him beyond control. In truth, I believe—such is the inveteracy of the old Adam in the most regenerate of us—that the memory of that ill-starred single combat at Slagby Moor had almost more to do with keeping alive the flame of Mr. Steel's wrath against the betrayer of Mary Lee, than that unhappy woman's far deeper wrongs.

"Your house should be sacred, Mrs. Archer," he replied, "in any ordinary case. But this man's falsehood and cruelty were of so black a dye as to leave no room in this case for the conventionalities of etiquette. Wherever and before whomsoever I might chance to meet him, it must have been my duty then and there to denounce him as the cold-hearted, treacherous, dastardly seducer and destroyer of an innocent girl—"

"If that is the nature of the accusation, Mr. Steel," said Mrs. Archer, "I think that the recollection that you have a daughter of your own might at least have restrained you from uttering it in the presence of Miss Hawthorn."

To tell the truth, the Commissioner, in the violence of his anger, had clean forgotten not only Miss Hawthorn's presence, but the deep interest she had in the scene. Mrs. Archer's allusion to her checked the torrent of his wrath in mid-flood. And all three involuntarily turned their eyes on Grace. Mrs. Archer and Campion were both astonished and shocked at her ghastly appearance. Steel, of course, could not feel much surprise; but he was for the moment quite at a loss what to say or how to act. So for a few moments there was a lull in the stormy scene, while the attention of all was riveted on Grace.

It may well be imagined that the girl's remarkable likeness to her mother must have struck both the men most vividly at such a moment, when the thoughts of both had been violently recalled to the time of Mary Lee's "few and evil days." And the likeness was the more forcible, because, in the intensity of Grace's emotion, it did not, as usually, reproduce Mary Lee in the fresh beauty which had first charmed their eyes, but as they had last seen her, pallid, haggard with wasting anxiety, and her glorious eyes dimmed with trouble. The effect on Campion was plainly visible. He began to tremble violently, and rested his hand against the doorway near which he stood, for support. It must be remembered that when he had seen Grace before, he had known of no link which could possibly connect her with Mary Lee, and he had supposed the likeness which she bore to her to be merely one of those casual resemblances which are far from uncommon. But now, with the light which the last few minutes' conversation had shed upon his mind, it was impossible that he could thus regard it. That he should find a girl almost the exact counterpart of Mary, living under the care of the man who had been his rival for Mary's love, was a coincidence which could not be accidental. Involuntarily he turned his eyes from Grace's face to that of Mr. Steel, with a questioning glance.

"Yes, wretched man," said Mr. Steel, in reply to the mute inquiry. "Look on your child—the child whom, without a thought of compunction, for the gratification of your vile lust, you doomed to an existence of misery and shame, from which she was saved by the man whom you had foully wronged!"

"My child?" said Campion scarce audibly; "she had no child. I knew of no child."

"Doubtless not," replied Steel, with a bitter laugh. "How should you, when you did not even trouble to make a single inquiry what had become of the mother?"

"That is true—most unhappily too true," replied Campion, in a tone of deep remorse. Then he advanced towards Grace, not with the rapturous impetuosity with which, had there been no fatal bar of wrong between them, a father might have been expected to clasp to his bosom a child whom he had found after lifelong separation, but with a hesitating, almost tottering step.

But Grace started up, and recoiling against the wall of the room with shuddering horror, wildly stretched out her hands as if to prevent his approaching her.

"Do not come near me!" she cried, in shrill accents of horror. "Do not touch me with those hands!—they are smeared—foul with the slime of the river which choked—O my God, my God!—may He forgive you! But never come in my sight again. O!" she cried, her shrill tones rising to a piercing shriek, as she fell on her knees, and with clasped hands cast her face wildly upwards, "O mother, mother!" The next moment she fell, or rather threw herself violently forward with her face on the floor, and lay there motionless.

"What this all means, goodness knows," said the bewildered Mrs. Archer hurriedly to Campion, who had stopped half-way across the room, and stood as if stunned, with his hand clenched against his brow. "But it's clear you are best away from here. So, for Heaven's sake, go!"

She then flew to Grace's aid. Campion, after casting one look of inexpressible, yearning anguish on the lovely form of the child who had repelled his touch with words that struck chill to his heart like a blighting curse, silently obeyed, and left the house.

CHAPTER XX.

GRACE TAKES HER COURSE, AND MEETS WITH AN ADVENTURE.

How Dr. Brandling fared in his advocacy of the cause of Budmash Khan before the august armchair of Sir Duncan MacTullub, I am ashamed to confess that I never thought of inquiring. From what I have heard, however, from my Mâ Bâp Provinces friends of that respected ruler's habits

I do not think it probable that he would be lightly seduced into a step so certain to be provocative of troublesome controversy and correspondence as an arbitrary interference with Mr. Steel's proceedings. The official doings of the Commissioner of Béshuckabad were about the last place that the wary old Scot would be likely to put his foot into. But, whatever his success may have been, Dr. Brandling—for as such he continued to be known by the very few people who were aware of his existence at all in Guppy Tibby—left that pleasant sanatorium the very evening of the discovery of his daughter. Though no longer officially connected with Diknugger, and having little enough heart now for any task, he stuck doggedly to that which he had undertaken on behalf of his Moofsid client, and returned for the purpose of holding a further consultation with him in Captain Baytree's gaol.

Mr. Steel and Grace too started for the plains the next morning. It had been decided that the latter was to remain at Béshuckabad only long enough to make the necessary preparations for her voyage, and was then to return to England, and seek employment and a home in the school in which she had formerly been pupil and governess.

This was a period of fierce and dubious strife in the soul of Grace Hawthorn; and the struggle, following upon the rapid succession of deeply-moving revelations which had rushed upon her during the past few days, visibly affected her health. Her cheeks began to grow pinched and thin, and a weary languor fell upon her in place of her former bright alacrity. But the conflict which had so lately occupied her whole mind and heart, that between the pale and barren phantom of a dead and gone love, and the warm, living, breathing spirit of what, if not love, was at any rate a hearty esteem—in a word, between Jack Shafto and Charley Ravensmore—this conflict had suddenly vanished as completely as if either or both of those young gentlemen had been the baseless fabric of a vision. The question between the rival lovers seemed to have no interest, no reality for her now. The controversy which now tossed her thoughts with stormy violence was also one between the past and the present, the living and the dead, between two hostile duties, two antagonistic yearnings, between the sacred shade of the mother who had been so cruelly driven to an early grave, and the sad and faded form of the father who had expiated the crimes of youth by a life-time of remorse. For in that long morning's walk they had taken together, during which the mysterious chords of nature had so strangely drawn them to one another, she had learnt many incidents of his life, and seen many indications of the deep hopeless gloom which underlay his restless eccentric manner. To all others he had ever been most reticent about his own past, so much so that, as we have seen, Baytree, and even his chosen friend Shafto—probably inferring his military education from unconcealable signs—had jumped to the conclusion that he had been a private soldier. But it is hard for an old man to parry the pretty inquisitiveness of a girl, in whom he feels a deep interest, about his own past; and during that walk round the hill Grace had learnt far more about Dr. Brandling than Shafto had over the evening pipes of the year and more that they had jointly occupied a two-roomed house. She had quickly discovered that he had lived in a position far superior to the humble office he held under Captain Baytree's administration. She was not long in gathering that it had been no necessity—at least no pecuniary necessity—which had impelled him to take a situation in life so unattractive to a man of fortune. And before they parted at Mrs. Archer's gate she had heard from his own lips almost the whole truth of this matter. A youth sadly wasted in selfish frivolity, and even worse, he told her, had been suddenly and fearfully brought to a check by a terrible family misfortune, of which his misconduct had been the chief cause. He gave her no further indication of the nature of this calamity, and it was evidently too delicate a subject for her to express curiosity about. This had taken the sunlight from his life, and at once totally changed its current. But though changed, the new course had for many years been as useless, selfish, as ill-adapted to give peace to a troubled and remorseful soul as the old one. He had tried to drown the voice of memory and conscience in the tumult of excitement. Wherever war was going on, he had rushed thither and sought out danger with reckless ardour. But to no purpose. The still small voice was heard above the din of battle, and the pale ghost of the past cowered even over the bivouac fire. Some other remedy, some other vent for the madness of his remorse, must be sought for. He naturally turned first, as many in similar plight have done, to religion. But the consciousness of his own guilt made him shrink from entering a profession which would lay upon him the duty of reproving the sins of others. Then he thought of the calling which he ultimately adopted. There was ample scope for energy, the excitement of danger, the absorption of thought, and the opportunity of atoning for the worse than uselessness of his past life, by doing some palpable and material good in the world.

So he went through the necessary training, and then for some years devoted himself to gratuitous labour amongst the poor in the East End of London. But in time the unconquerable restlessness seized him again, and set him wandering. Then he bethought him of all the neglected misery he had seen in India, when he served there with his regiment. He determined to settle to his chosen work in that country. He had of course without difficulty obtained a recommendation to some official dispenser of the loaves and fishes of patronage, and procured from him that very small sprat, the Diknugger civil surgeonship.

All this Grace had heard from him with sympathy indeed, but sympathy weakened by wonder. But now that she possessed the key to the story she could estimate the vehemence and the agony of the remorse, which had driven her unhappy father from one career to another, which had made him, like Cain, a vagabond on the face of the earth, but for which in truth there was no rest but in the grave.

Had she a right to scorn this deep repentance as she had done? This was the question which tortured her, and left no room in her mind for a thought of either Ravensmore or Shafto. But, on the other hand, how could she offer the kiss of filial love to those lips which had so treacherously deceived her mother? How could she even touch that hand which had actually spurned her mother to the earth with unmanly violence, while she was in the act of imploring justice and mercy?

Over and over again during these days she knelt and passionately invoked that mother's spirit to aid her in her perplexity. But she also, while on her knees, appealed, as by good hap she had been early taught to do, to a more potent source of counsel than poor weak, vain, and passionate Mary Lee's wraith; and the Providence which shapes our ends solved her difficulty for her.

The epidemic of typhus fever, which we saw raging in the neighbourhood of Gurhi Moofsid in January, had been got under to a great extent; but the disease, fed by semi-starvation, still lingered here and there. Something or other required the presence of a European officer at Gurhi Moofsid, and Baytree sent out Bumpas. The unlucky young man caught the fever, and was brought back to Diknugger very ill. A native doctor had succeeded Brandling as civil surgeon, and as not much reliance could be placed upon him, Dr. Brandling, being on the spot in a private capacity, readily gave his services to poor Bumpas. The patient recovered after an illness of no great length, but the doctor caught the fever, and in a most virulent form.

When Baytree saw two out of the little handful of Europeans in the colony struck down one after another, he may possibly have speculated with an uncomfortable feeling as to who might be the next. At all events, he acknowledged for the first time that there *was* fever in the district, and promptly wrote off to the Commissioner—in a respectfully reproachful style, which he might have used had this been the last of many vainly repeated appeals—urging the absolute necessity of sending them an English doctor.

Mr. Steel arranged to despatch at once to Diknugger a young surgeon from one of the regiments in the garrison. And then he pondered as to whether he should tell Grace (who was to have started on her homeward journey in a few days) of her father's illness. Unquestionably it would be best for her that the criminal parent, whom chance had so unfortunately thrown across her path, should drop silently out of her sight again. But, on the other hand, Colonel Campion, as Mr. Steel knew, was a very rich man, with no near legitimate relations. And even the virulent prejudice with which Mr. Steel looked upon his old rival could not blind him to the manifest emotion with which Campion had been overcome on the discovery of his child. The Commissioner was a man of the world and of sense, and argued to himself that it could not be right that his ward should throw away the chance of becoming an heiress. If, as he was led to suppose from Baytree's letter, Grace's father was on his death-bed, a letter from her—which at such a moment might with propriety be addressed even to the man who had been guilty of such unutterable iniquity—conveying her forgiveness of the wrongs he had done her and her mother, might change the whole fortune of her life.

Mr. Steel accordingly told Grace the news he had received, and was about to follow up this announcement by dropping a suggestion as to the course which he proposed that she should take under the circumstance. But Grace gave him no time for this.

"My place is by my father's sick-bed," she said, without a moment of hesitation.

Mr. Steel expostulated. He gravely reminded her that though forgiveness at such a juncture might be a Christian duty, no such consideration could require, or even justify, her reconcilement or association with the man who had brought her mother to destruction. He also warned her of the dangerously contagious nature of the disease of which Campion was ill. But Grace would not listen to a word he said. She kept on desiring him, with repeated and increasingly impatient urgency, to arrange the means for her travelling at once to Diknugger. In the end Mr. Steel had no choice but to give way. A dooly and bearers were promptly provided, and within two hours of her hearing the news Grace was being shuffled along the miry high-road leading to Captain Baytree's capital, to the monotonous accompaniment of the tune which the dooly-bearers hummed in unison with the cadence of their footsteps. So successfully did she inspire these honest fellows' minds and legs with her own impatience, possibly through the medium of that silver chord which is a wonderful conductor of sympathy in such a case, that she reached her destination in an astonishingly short space of time, some hours before the regimental surgeon, who was not nearly so keen to exchange the comforts of the mess for the gloom of Diknugger, arrived upon the scene.

She found her father hovering between life and death, and delirious, in the little room in the sarai which he still occupied. Shafto was nursing him with devoted and unremitting care. The other Europeans in the station rather fought shy of the infected sick-room; and not unnaturally. Catcheside had his children to think of; should he catch the disease it would indeed be a dreadful domestic calamity. And Baytree had to consider the interests of the State; were he to fall ill, would it not be a dire public disaster? But Mr. De Sylva, the treasury clerk, was bravely helping Shafto—though I should not omit to state that the value of his services was somewhat impaired by the large quantity of brandy which he continued to imbibe throughout the day and night, partly to keep up his strength and partly to drown his sorrow. I daresay Mr. De Rozario, the head clerk, would have been equally assiduous at the sick-bed; but as his duties required his frequent attendance in Captain Baytree's office, he had received a plain warning that if he was caught going within a quarter of a mile of Dr. Brandling's bedside, he should be immediately dismissed. But though thus debarred from sharing his friend De Sylva's labours, he made up as well as he could by a free participation both in his condolences and potations.

Grace's dooly was set down before the door, and Mr. De

Sylva, wrapt in alcoholic odours, came out, thinking probably it was the doctor from Béshuckabad. Grace scrambled out of the dooly, and flying past the clerk, entered Campion's room. Her father lay motionless, with the flush of fever on his sunken cheeks, and the light of delirium in his eyes. He did not notice her entrance. Shafto sat by the bed, half dozing. He roused himself and sprang to his feet as Grace entered.

"What has brought you here, Miss Hawthorn? You must not stay—indeed, you must not go near," he exclaimed, stopping her by laying his hand upon her arm, as she attempted to pass him and approach the bed.

"Let me go," she said, pushing his hand aside. "Let me go to my father."

It was no time for explanations; at any rate Miss Hawthorn thought not. All she vouchsafed to tell Shafto in the few brief moments of conversation they had together in the course of that day, apart from Dr. Brandling's bedside, was that she had discovered that he was her father. And Shafto the rather shrank from making more particular inquiries, because during the violent period of his patient's delirium, before Grace's arrival, he had heard words which seemed to point to some dark and terrible story, with which Shafto now conjectured that Grace's birth must be connected. If Grace was indeed the offspring of such a love-story as Brandling's ravings suggested, it was a subject upon which any question must have been infinitely worse than indelicate. As for the rest of the community at Diknugger, they had no suspicion of the real motive which had brought Miss Hawthorn to the apothecary's sick-bed. They thought she had come out of sheer philanthropy, on one of those amiable but eccentric feminine impulses, such as that which took Florence Nightingale to the hospitals of Scutari.

Shafto gave up his room, next to Brandling's, to Grace, and had a bed made for himself in the police-office. But he still continued to take a large share in the attendance on the sick man.

The crisis of the disease occurred a few days after Grace's arrival. It took a favourable turn, and the doctor, to whom spare living and hard exercise had given a constitution of wrought iron, rapidly mended. It need scarcely be said that Shafto during this time made no attempt to trench upon the subject of the love he had so foolishly thrown away. Nevertheless Grace was not free from amorous solicitations, very ill in accord with the present state of her mind. Ravensmore had written to her a passionate letter demanding the consent to his suit, which he would have received direct from her lips but for his unlucky accident. Mrs. Archer had confided to him in confidence something of the startling revelations which had been made in her drawing-room. But Ravensmore could not see how these could in any way affect the position in which they had stood towards one another, as they lingered on the margin of the brook, before her father's appearance. This letter followed Grace to Diknugger, and she left it unanswered—indeed unthought of—for some days. But as soon as the great strain of anxiety was over, and the sick man took a decided turn towards recovery, she replied to it with a gentle but most uncompromisingly firm refusal.

But Ravensmore was an obstinate man, who would not, and could not, take a denial, however firm. He had set his heart on winning Grace Hawthorn, and win her he was determined that he would, even if the whole order of nature opposed his design. So much the worse for the order of nature, that was all.

Now Bumpas was almost convalescent when Dr. Brandling fell ill. But the effects of a severe fever do not all disappear in a week or two. It was evident that for some time Mr. Bumpas would be quite unfit for work, and it was highly desirable that his progress towards the recovery of his normal robustious vigour should be stimulated by change of air. So the doctor from Béshuckabad sent him away on sick-leave. But Captain Baytree was not the man to be left without an assistant to bully. And he importuned Wiggins, the secretary, on this point to such an intolerable degree (enlarging on the overwhelming mass of work now thrown upon him, and the sufferings of heart-sick suitors, who consequently had to bear "the law's delays"), that although Wiggins feared not work (when it fell on other people), neither regarded suitors, yet was he so wearied by Baytree's continual writing, that at last he looked about for some one to send in Bumpas' place. He pounced upon young Tuppins Hawpenny, who had just come up to Guppy Tibby to recruit on two months' leave, after untold labours in the sweltering deserts of Gurdahgunj. Ineffable was the ill-used Hawpenny's disgust when he was told that, instead of the dalliance and coolth which he had promised his weary soul and exhausted body at Guppy Tibby, he was to go off to drudgery again on the burning plains under the lash of that notorious taskmaster, Captain Baytree. But there was yet balm in Gilead for Hawpenny. As soon as Ravensmore heard of what was going on, he went to the astonished Sir Duncan MacTullub, and suggested that, instead of the arrangement proposed, Mr. Hawpenny should take his (Ravensmore's) desk in the secretariat, while he, the said Ravensmore to wit, should go as Captain Baytree's assistant to Diknugger. He had never, he said, had any experience of district work, and here was a fine opportunity to learn it. It need scarcely be said that Ravensmore had his way. The delighted Hawpenny, with a heart swelling with gratified ambition, entered into possession of the under-secretary's little room (and, I may add, heartily wished himself out of it again before a week was over); while Ravensmore hurried down to Diknugger, where he was hospitably accommodated with a lodging in Captain Baytree's own house, and treated by that stern martinet with a deference and consideration which he was by no means wont to lavish on his subordinates.

It is probable that this very unlooked-for addition to the administrative staff of the little station had almost as much to do as the wretchedly cramped and uncomfortable accommodation in the sarai bungalow in determining Grace to hasten her father's removal to Béshuckabad. Brandling (for we may as well continue to call him by the name he was still known by) had picked up so well under her care that he was quite strong enough to be moved by easy stages to the Cantonment, whence, after a further rest, he might continue his journey down country to Bombay. For now that he had regained possession of his child, he was eager to welcome her into the ancestral halls of Beechly. So Ravensmore had no sooner come to Diknugger than he learned, to his infinite vexation, that Grace was about, at once, to leave it.

When Dr. Brandling bade good-bye to Shafto, neither made the slightest allusion to Grace, though the thoughts of both were full of her. Shafto of course was deterred by the same considerations which had repressed his curiosity in conversation with Grace herself. Brandling would have given much to be able to encourage the young man, whom he dearly loved, to renew his suit. But he was conscious that he could exercise no influence over his daughter either through filial duty or filial trustfulness. He acknowledged to himself, in bitterness of soul, that he owed her presence at his bedside merely to charity, to the same feeling which takes a sister of mercy to the wards of a hospital, where all the inmates are strangers to her. So the two men parted, as both fully believed, never to meet again, with sorrow that was deepened by the enforced reserve which they were obliged to maintain on the subject which was dearest to the heart of each.

Shafto, however, without any encouragement from without, had made a desperate effort to secure a *redintegratio amoris.* But Grace checked him at the very beginning with a quiet but grave and almost stern repulse. As to what he had said to her and thought of her when they last parted, he need ask no pardon for that. If his behaviour needed forgiveness, he had hers freely, and she asked forgiveness from him for her own impatience and hard words. But the whole current of her life had become changed since then. She had now before her a duty which left no room for any such ideas as he sought to renew.

"Why should your duty to Dr. Brandling be any bar to our union, Grace?" urged Shafto desperately. "I love him as you do, loved him before you did: and have we not even now been sharing together in sympathetic anxiety the ebb and flow of hope by his sick-bed?"

"For all you have done for him," answered Grace, "take my heartfelt thanks. Take them, too, for all that you would bestow upon me. Be assured I do not undervalue it. But the duty I speak of is no common one of child towards parent. It is one that I can neither explain nor—shrink from. And it sets an impassable barrier between you and me. Good-bye," she said, giving him her hand. "May God bless you."

Grace got away from Diknugger without the necessity of any further explanation with her other pertinacious suitor. Ravensmore could hardly force himself upon her while she was in close attendance upon her father. They left the station late in the afternoon, both travelling in doolies, and as they could go but slowly, it was almost dark when they reached their first halting-place, the pretty bungalow near Zoolumkote, where Grace had spent the day with the Steels and Ravensmore and Shafto on their march towards Diknugger in the winter. Here they found everything prepared for the sick man with solicitous care; for Shafto had ridden out that morning and seen to all the arrangements himself.

One mark of attention, however, Grace could willingly have dispensed with. This was a visit almost immediately after their arrival at the bungalow from the young Nawab. Grace, knowing how much her father, as a staunch champion of the adverse Gurhi Moofsid faction, disliked this youth, and also because the Colonel was fatigued with his journey and required quiet, received the Nawab alone. She had thought him offensive enough on the occasion of their former meeting. But on that occasion, while she was a member of the Commissioner's household, his flattering evidences of admiration for her beauty had been restrained to some extent by his feeling of awe for her guardian. But now that she had left Mr. Steel's family apparently in disgrace (for we may be sure that the row between the Commissioner's wife and Miss Hawthorn had not been conducted so quietly as not to reach the ears of bearers and ayahs, who in their turn had disseminated their own account of the affair far and wide, wherever the doings of the Commissioner of Béshuckabad and his belongings were regarded with interest), now that Grace had been dismissed from that household, and was travelling about the country an errant damsel in attendance on a discarded, uncovenanted apothecary, the gallant Nawab's demeanour was a great deal more familiar than respectful.

Grace was dreadfully annoyed and perplexed. She did not know how to get rid of the wretch, and half regretted that she had so peremptorily rejected the offer which Shafto had made to accompany her and her father and see them safely across the river. At last, by pleading the absolute necessity of returning to her attendance on the sick Doctor Sahib, she induced her troublesome visitor to take his leave. Before doing so, with his twinkling little eyes fixed on her face, he presented her with a pair of beautiful gold bangles, which she, however, to his manifest amazement, summarily refused to accept. He assured her they were worth three hundred rupees each; but even this information, incredible as it seemed, made no impression upon her. So the fat youth handed the despised trinkets back to his attendant with an air, in which offence at the slight of his gift, and satisfaction at saving its cost, seemed to contend for mastery.

Then he informed Miss Hawthorn with deep regret, in which she did not appear to sympathise, that he was obliged to keep an appointment with Captain Baytree at seven o'clock the next morning, which necessitated his immediate departure for Diknugger, otherwise he would gladly have condescended to remain, and afford the young lady and her invalid friend the benefit of his protection and company for as long as they remained in the vicinity of his castle. Grace had never deemed it possible that she could ever experience sentiments of kindliness and gratitude towards Captain Baytree, a man whom she had instinctively abhorred from the moment when she first met him; but now she acknowledged her mistake.

The visit of the Nawab upset her, strained as her nerves already were by fatigue and anxiety, far more than such a trifle should have done. She felt angry with herself for her weakness, but this did not make matters any better. So, after seeing her father composed to rest, she retired into the next room, leaving the door between them ajar, and without undressing sat or walked about the room till long past midnight, her mind tossed and disturbed with a strange medley of distressing thoughts and irrepressible fancies.

Amongst other things, altogether irrelevant to her present situation and to the serious cares which should have occupied her mind, the picture of that blank-walled dungeon, the women's apartments in the *kila* of Zoolumkote, and the dark hints of horrible deeds still perpetrated in the silent recesses of such places, which Shafto had thrown out on the occasion of their visit to the castle, though neither had ever once recurred to her memory since that day, would keep cropping up in an obtrusive way now. Of course this is easily accounted for. The mere circumstance of her revisiting for the first time the bungalow whence the visit had been paid, of her having just seen the Nawab himself again, and of her mind being in a state to receive and dwell upon gloomy impressions, are quite sufficient to explain the phenomenon. But to Grace it seemed like a presentiment.

And a presentiment, as a matter of fact, it was very soon to be proved to be. For though the Nawab was at this moment sonorously snoring off the evening meal with which he had overstuffed himself, in his lodging at Diknugger, and the ladies of his household and their attendants were doubtless lapt in balmy slumber, and free as newborn babes from thoughts of ill within the stuffy but very snug and safe zenana, danger and captivity were nevertheless close at hand—even at the door.

She was aroused from her thoughts by a terrible hubbub near the servants' houses on the further side of the compound. She went to the window and looked out. But the night was pitch dark, and she could see nothing; her door did not command a view of the huts from which the sounds proceeded. The noise increased, and shrieks began to mingle with the hoarser tones of men's voices.

Though Grace, in her present tension of thought, was naturally inclined to attribute the uproar to the occurrence of something dreadful, she made a vigorous effort to call up the strength of mind of which she had a fair reserve. It could after all, she assured herself, be only some squabble amongst the servants. But it must be stopped, or it would disturb the sick man in the next room, to whom a good night's rest after the fatigue of his journey was essential. So, after peeping through the half-open door, and seeing that her father was still asleep, Grace slipped out and ran across towards the servants' houses.

The hubbub had somewhat lulled, and though screams still continued to break the silence of the night, they seemed to be rapidly receding in the distance, as if the persons uttering them were running away; there was a glare of light beyond the huts, and when Grace had got within a few yards of them, and paused, uncertain whether, as the noise had almost ceased, she should go on, or return to the house, three or four men suddenly appeared round the corner, one of them carrying a torch, and all armed with *tulwars*. Grace turned and fled back towards the house. But they had caught sight of her white dress, and with a savage yell started in pursuit. We know she was a good runner, and might have reached the house before them—if that could have availed her aught—but half-way she put her foot into a hole and fell flat on her face. She was up again in a moment, but by this time she was surrounded by fierce turbaned faces, and dark eyes flashing on her savagely from between tangled masses of unkempt hair. She had occasionally seen the wild figure of old Kumbukt Khan when he came to visit the Commissioner, and had frequently heard Mr. Steel speak of the savagery of that old chief's clansmen. As she looked on her captors, in a moment the terrible conviction flashed upon her mind that she was in the hands of Moofsid marauders.

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE OF GRACE'S LOVERS FOLLOWS HER.

I NEED not perhaps say much more than the reader has already heard in hints and allusions dropped by Dr. Brandling as to what had been the fortunes of the Moofsids—or rather their misfortunes; for all that happened to that luckless race in these days took that objectionable prefix—since we last visited their abode. The famine, so to speak, burnt itself out; that is, it starved so many men and animals to death that the scanty crops which came up in due course sufficed to keep the bodies and souls of the remainder together. The fever also died out, chiefly, it seemed, because these things can't last for ever. Pæna, despite her game leg and the roughness of the paths through the ravines, stuck to her pursuit of that antecedent rogue, Budmash Khan, and got him into her grip at last; and the hopeful youth was at this moment lying in Diknugger gaol, awaiting an opportunity of being shipped across the "black water" to the pleasant isles of Andaman, there to atone in exile for breaking into the worthy Cheetun Shah's granaries, a crime for which, as Shafto remarked, he richly deserved to be punished, as it was only by the merest chance, and not from any goodwill, that he was not concerned in it.

His uncle the old chief, and his cousin the fiery and half-cracked Dilawár Khan, naturally, however, did not look upon his fate from this very philosophical and logical point of view. The latter especially was full of vengeful thoughts and threats, and from the first talked of forcible rescue, and hinted broadly at following that up by proclaiming the independence of the country, and roasting the Nawab in his own dripping over the burning embers of his own roof-tree. It was a pestilent class of wandering fakeers who had put notions of this sort into the young man's flighty brain, fellows who went about collecting subscriptions to keep alive the good cause of religion and national independence, but who were themselves in heart the most loyal subjects of the

British Crown; for under its tolerant and drowsy sway they were able to drive a profitable trade, that might not be so safely carried on under any other rule.

But when Dilawár Khan talked in this way before his father, the old man would sententiously remark that if his son had not happened to be snug in the nursery at the time they had their former thrashing from the English, he would not be so lightly inclined to invite another. So, as long as the hope of obtaining justice by peaceful means was kept alive by Dr. Brandling's efforts on Budmash Khan's behalf, no overt act followed Dilawár Kahn's big talk.

But now all chance of aid from that quarter had been put an end to by the doctor's illness. And the young man's vehemence and persistence began to tell on the old one's enfeebled will. Not to make an unnecessary mystery, I may mention here, what only became known at a later time, that more than one of the insidious fakeers who fanned the fierce flame of Dilawár Khan's fury, and strove to puff some slight glow even amongst the cold ashes of Kumbukt Khan's spirit, were in the pay of the Nawab. A futile rising against the British power, or even a successful attempt to break into the Diknugger gaol, would put the coping-stone to the fortunes of the present house of Zoolumkote by consummating the ruin of that which it had superseded. This scheme, it need not be said, was not the product of the Nawab's thick-witted brain. It had been conceived and patiently carried out by his astute and faithful Diwân.

Between three and four o'clock in the morning, after the departure of Dr. Brandling and Grace, Shafto was aroused from his sleep by a summons from his chief, Colonel Catcheside, to meet him at once at Captain Baytree's house, on a matter of the utmost urgency. He hurried on his clothes and went to the Deputy-Commissioner's house. He found Baytree, Catcheside, and Ravensmore already assembled in the office-room, the two latter in much excitement, but the former as cool as a cucumber. The nature of the alarm was soon explained.

The headman of a village lying about half-way, as the crow flies, between the station and the ferry on the Béshuckabad road, had galloped in half an hour before, and brought the news that there was a great fire to be seen apparently at or near the ferry; and that some of his villagers who had been out in their fields during the night had seen a large body of men, many of whom were armed, and some at least of whom they declared, from their dress and appearance, to be Moofsids, pass by towards the river some two hours before the conflagration had been seen. One man said he recognised in their leader, who, with several others, was mounted, no other than Dilawár Khan.

"There can't be a doubt about it," said Catcheside, in great agitation. "They have brought the boats over from the other side of the river and burnt them, and we are cut off from all hope of aid from Béshuckabad."

"Yes, yes," said Baytree calmly. "But that is only half the story. The Thanadar of Bubblana has just now come in—mind, Catcheside, you must come down upon him when this is over, and smash him at least, for leaving his post—he has just arrived, and says there is a body of several thousand rioters marching on the station from the direction of Gurhi Moofsid."

"I haven't more than fifty men in the lines, so help me!" exclaimed Catcheside, gesticulating excitedly, "and half of them have never been drilled, and ten of the remainder are Moofsids themselves, and of course will join with their brethren."

"Pooh-pooh! not a bit of it," replied Baytree, "unless they see you looking as if you wondered why they don't. Your Moofsid knows as well as anybody which side his bread is buttered on, and will not be too eager to exchange the plenty of the police lines for the starvation of his ravines again."

"Still, I think our only course is to put the ladies and children into your carriage, and let us all make a bold push for Zoolumkote. The *kila* might be defended for a time, though the rampart is ruined on one side."

"A *bold* push it would have to be indeed," put in Ravensmore, with supreme contempt. "I for one have no courage enough to face the consequences, which would be universal derision for the rest of our lives."

"By the way, the Nawab is here, is he not?" said Baytree. "If he has brought in a good handful of armed sowars—and the conceited fool seldom moves without a tag-rag and bobtail a hundred yards long—they might supplement your police. Ah, here *is* the Nawab. Now, I will tell you what I propose to do. These fellows, no doubt, are rather strong for us at present—though, of course, you may safely divide the Thanadar's enumeration by ten or twenty. Everything depends on delaying their advance. If we can only keep them at a distance for two hours or so, we shall have So-and-so, and So-and-so, and So-and-so in" (mentioning influential zemindars of the neighbourhood), "and shall probably be able to present a force that will send our friends back to Gurhi with their tails between their legs; for these Moofsids are great braggarts, but great cowards. *But*—if they only have the sense—luckily they are d—d fools, too—but if they have the sense to make a dash of it, why, egad! I don't see what is to prevent their burning our bungalows, knocking us on the head, and carrying off Budmash Khan and all the rest of the gaol-birds in triumph." And Captain Baytree rubbed his hands and smiled pleasantly.

"Let us now gather the few natives who will stand by us," cried Catcheside, as excited as ever, but on another tack now, "and sally out and attack them. It is madness waiting to be crushed here. Why do we waste time? Come, let us go. Shafto, follow me!"

"Nonsense," said Baytree. "We must delay them, and the only chance of doing that is by pretending to parley. Now, Nawab, you are the man to whom I will intrust that honourable duty. You, of course, are the fittest person, being a near relation of the rebel leader, Kumbukt Khan; he will listen to you if to any one."

But the Nawab flatly refused the proffered honour.

"Then," said Baytree, in a tone meant to clinch the matter, and check in anticipation any idle debate, "your Diwân must go as your substitute."

The Diwân, who stood respectfully behind his master's chair, turned green.

"Catcheside," continued Baytree, in the same decided tone, "you will be kind enough to order four picked men to accompany and watch—I mean *protect*—the Diwân. It will be best that none of the Nawab's own men should accompany him; it might alarm or irritate the rioters."

"For God's sake, Sahib—" gasped the Diwân, whose complexion had now assumed a colour which I have no word or similitude adequate to describe. But Baytree would not listen.

"There, Catcheside," he said, waving his hand imperiously, "don't lose time. *You* know what to say, Diwân, better than I could instruct you. Now," he continued complacently, when Catcheside had taken the terrified Diwân off, and the Nawab had followed, "if the Moofsids are the men I take them for, they will not knock that man, who has done each and all of them more injury individually and generally than any other person alive—they won't, if they are half the men I believe them to be, knock him brutally on the head, or cut his throat. The least they will do will be to hang him, and it is more probable still that they will roast him over a slow fire. Either operation takes time, and I calculate we shall gain at least half an hour, which may be of inestimable value to us."

What may have been the view taken by Messieurs Ravensmore and Shafto of Captain Baytree's diplomacy, neither that officer nor the world was destined to learn; for before either of them had time to speak, a horseman dashed up to the door with a portentous clatter.

"Well, what next?" asked Baytree, going out into the verandah, followed by the two young men.

"Zoolumkote has been attacked," cried the excited cavalier.

"Pooh! is that all?" answered Baytree. "Now," he added in English, "if these scoundrels who are coming down upon us could only be informed that their brethren were sacking the Nawab's *kila*, gad! I suspect Budmash

Khan would be left to cool his heels in his irons, while they made off to Zoolumkote to get their share of the loot. Is the looting over yet?" he asked in Hindustani.

"There has been no looting. The Kurneyl Sahib" (such was the respectable title of the commander-in-chief of the Nawab's score of tatterdemalion musketeers), "the Kurneyl Sahib made all the men that were left in the fort appear on the ramparts, and had the big drum beat; and then the rebels, after giving us a lot of abuse, went off."

"Where had they come from?"

"They were the party returning from seizing the ferry-boats."

"And so they went off without doing any harm?" said Baytree, in a tone of excusable disappointment, "and have gone off to join the main body, I suppose?"

"Yes, no doubt," said the messenger; "but they did do some harm first. When they found we were on the alert at the *kila*, they went to the bungalow and burnt it down."

"Burnt the bungalow!" exclaimed Ravensmore and Shafto in a breath. "Good Heavens! are you certain of this?"

"O, no matter," said Baytree; "we will get a heavy compensation from Kumbukt Khan for the damage, and build a better one. The original plan of that one was intrinsically bad, and no tinkering could ever have made a really comfortable house of it."

"But, merciful Heavens! Brandling and Miss Hawthorn were in it!"

"By Jove! so they were. O, we will make old Kumbukt Khan shell out threefold compensation on that account, and if I don't build *such* a rest-house—"

"What became of the Sahib and the Mem Sahib?" eagerly inquired the young men of the messenger.

"I had not time to wait to make certain; but they could not be found when I left. It was believed they were burnt in the house."

"Here, syce! my horse, quick!" shouted Shafto.

"And mine. Come, don't be all day!" screamed Ravensmore.

"Where are you two going to?" asked Baytree. "Not to the bungalow? Why, the mischief is done and over. If they have been burnt in the house they are cinders by this time, and if they have escaped they are all safe; for you hear the incendiaries have gone off to join the other party. No, no. There is other work for you both—work that will be of some use."

"I must be satisfied of their fate," said Shafto. "Ravensmore will remain with you here."

"I'll not remain here another moment while there is a doubt of Miss Hawthorn's safety," cried Ravensmore.

"And you will both abandon the post of duty and the post of danger? leave the ladies and the women in the station here to the brutality of this band of savages? leave Catcheside's helpless children, and the swarm of whitey-brown little imps that are for ever popping in and out of Mr. De Sylva's quarters like rabbits in a warren—you will leave them to be butchered, while you run away on a wild-goose chase? Come, young fellows, show more manliness than that." Thus expostulated Captain Baytree.

"I tell you," replied Ravensmore impetuously, as he sprang on the horse with which the syce now hurried up, "one tress of that angel's hair is of more value than all the lives in Diknugger put together, and Béshuckabad to boot; and if one of them has been but singed, I'll have a Moofsid's life for every single hair in it."

And off he rode at full gallop, staying no further question.

"H—m," muttered Baytree, "his angel is a veritable guardian one for him, for she is leading him nicely out of danger. Well, Shafto," he said, as that individual stood hesitating, with one foot in the stirrup and one on the ground, looking wistfully after the rapidly-disappearing figure of his rival, "do you intend to obey orders, or do you propose to run away too?"

"After what you have said," answered Shafto, in accents of utter despondency, and slowly withdrawing his foot from the stirrup, "I cannot go. If harm has befallen them, then

I care not what my own fate may be—disgrace or death were equally indifferent to me. But there are others to be thought of, as you have said. I am ready to be employed wherever and however I can be of most use."

"Then go off as hard as you can to the Bunder ferry, six miles further up the river. It is evident from Dilawár Khan's party having returned by Zoolumkote, that they have not thought of securing that means of passing the river. From there despatch a messenger for aid to Béshuckabad, and then return yourself to the station as fast as you can."

"And must I then turn my back on danger, after all?" said Shafto, little satisfied with the tame part assigned to him. "Surely a native might do that errand."

"No, indeed. It is the one chance all our safety depends on, and I would not trust it to a native for worlds."

So Shafto reluctantly set off, leaving both his lady-love and the foe behind him. Assuredly his lot was hard.

It must be confessed that Baytree came out well in this affair. A better man might have envied the way he put the case of duty versus impulse before the two young men, and one of these at least felt lasting gratitude to him for his having recalled him to the right path at a critical moment. Shafto could never afterwards speak of Baytree's most unscrupulous iniquities with the hearty reprobation which was their due. The thought that he had once been beholden to this shameless official profligate for a timely warning against taking a step which he could never have looked back upon without self-contempt, always rose to his mind and softened his opinions of Baytree strangely.

But Captain Baytree not being one of the heroes of this veracious romance, we need not waste further time in recording or commenting upon his sayings and doings in this eventful crisis. It would indeed be interesting and instructive to lay before the reader an account of the cleverly mingled measures of force and fraud, which happily resulted in warding off the threatened attack upon the station, and sending the invading army in full retreat back to their native fastnesses within an hour or two after sunrise, plundering all the villages on their road, but leaving Major Baytree's bungalow and the gaol which contained the person of Budmash Khan intact. To those whom a fuller recital of the doughty deeds of the Diknugger Ulysses would please, I would say, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the Mâ Bâp Provinces—to wit, in the official *Gazette*, at pages 1782 *et seq.*—for the year in which these occurrences took place? There may be found a full account of all (or *very* nearly all) that happened (and a good deal besides), in the hero's own best style, which is as infinitely superior to that of Cæsar as the brilliancy of the deeds commemorated transcended the most redoubtable triumphs of the Roman general. There, those who run may read, mark, and learn how entirely the outbreak itself, and certain unfortunate accidents which marred the lustre of its suppression, were brought about by the misconduct and mismanagement of others, while the full credit for the final triumph of order belongs entirely to one single individual, named Greene Baytree.

But our task is to follow those who showed less steadiness in the hour of trial. Ravensmore was certainly wrong to go flying off to look after Grace Hawthorn, who, if she was not buried beneath the ashes of the rest-house, and so beyond any help that her devoted lover could hope to bring, must be in a state of comparative safety, either in the neighbouring village, or behind the solid walls of the *kila* of Zoolumkote—certainly in infinitely smaller peril than the numerous less attractive, but still human and Christian, females whom he left behind without a care in Diknugger. Still, I don't know that one can blame him very severely. Probably, if we had not done the very same thing as he did under the same circumstances, it would have been —in the case of many of us—only because the warmth of our devotion to the lady of our love was less ardent than his.

He was in much too high a state of excitement to think of the expediency of taking any one with him to give aid, should there yet be time for aid to avail. Luckily, however, as he galloped along the road, he met three young fellows, fine specimens of what we may call the yeoman class, who were riding into the station from an adjacent village, armed, having heard of the threatened attack, and eager to prove their loyalty to the "Sirkar." On meeting Ravensmore, and exchanging a hurried word with him, these turned their horses' heads and galloped after the young Englishman, naturally taking it for granted that he was hastening to where there was the greatest likelihood of coming to hard knocks with the Moofsids.

The small party reached the rest-house in little over half an hour. They found nothing but the blackened brick walls and the pillars of the verandah standing, while inside was a smoking mass of charred timber and thatch burnt to ashes, which, as half a dozen labourers worked hard at removing the *débris*, and disturbed the light substance, rose in dense clouds, which enveloped and almost choked them.

Dr. Brandling sat on the unburnt end of a fallen beam, evidently completely exhausted with the frantic exertions which (as one of the labourers whispered to Ravensmore) he had, notwithstanding his weak condition, at first made with his own hands to assist in the removal of the rubbish. He was now, with feeble voice, but intense and impatient earnestness, urging the men to redoubled efforts, and stimulating their zeal in their task by promises of the most extravagant reward.

"Good God! is it true, then!" exclaimed Ravensmore, throwing himself from his horse. "Is she—has she been—Come, lend a hand here. It may not even yet—it *shall* not—be too late."

And therewith he set about lifting and removing huge beams with the strength of a young Samson, ably and zealously aided by his three followers.

But Ravensmore had not been more than a few minutes at work when a murmur began to arise among the bystanders, and reached the men who were working at *débris*, causing them one after the other to pause in their labours. Ravensmore was at first too intent on the desperate search to notice this; but at last, observing that all save himself had desisted from the work, he too stood up, and angrily asked the cause of their cessation. He was soon informed. It appeared that a few villagers living on the edge of the waste two or three miles off had some time before daylight seen three men on horseback making at full speed for the jungle, and that one of them carried before him on the saddle a person (whether a man or woman the men could not in the dark make out, but dressed in white clothing), who seemed to be struggling violently but vainly to get free.

On hearing this, Ravensmore began eagerly to inquire into the circumstances of the burning of the bungalow. From Brandling, distracted with grief, he could get no coherent or intelligible information. But from the servants of the rest-house he learnt that they had been suddenly aroused from sleep by a party of armed Moofsids rushing into their huts, and laying about recklessly with their tulwars. The darkness and confusion, however, fortunately favoured their escape, and they all managed to get outside and run away, without sustaining any damage beyond a slight flesh-wound which one received on the shoulder. They were too terrified to stop until they got to the village, nearly a quarter of a mile off, and there gave the alarm. But scarcely had a body of the villagers started towards the bungalow, when they saw that it was in a blaze. They hurried forward; but before they could arrive one side of the house was completely enveloped in flames, and the fire was spreading with fearful rapidity along the thatched roof. They rushed into the room which was still unburnt, and which was that occupied by the invalid. He had apparently that very instant been awoke by the heat and noise of the fire, and was just raising himself in his bed.

Two stalwart villagers seized him, and carried him from the blazing house. He resisted his removal as well as his feeble strength enabled him, and wildly expostulated against being carried out until he had rescued Grace from the next room. But to enter the next room would have been to enter a burning fiery furnace; they had indeed barely time to escape with life from that in which he himself had lain. Nevertheless, the moment they set him down outside, he sprang up and rushed back to the burning house. They only seized him in time to forcibly withhold him from plunging into the midst of the fire. He struggled frantically, and despite the enfeebling effects of his illness, it was all that three or four strong young fellows could do to hold him. And the struggle was still going on when the whole roof fell in, within a few feet of them. Grace Hawthorn not having been found outside, it was naturally taken for granted that she had perished in the burning house. But now the information just brought seemed to throw considerable doubt upon this inference.

"Don't give up the work here!" cried Ravensmore. "There is still no certainty. But you," he said to the three young men who had followed him from Diknugger, "come with me. Get these villagers' horses, and let them show us where they saw the men pass. Is there a tracker to be found?"

A servant of the Nawab's, who had been directing the labourers in their efforts to clear away the ruins, stepped forward and said that one of the people he had with him was well skilled in tracking; they, too, would mount their horses and go with Ravensmore. So the party, now increased to eight, set forth, leaving Brandling, who was totally incapable of joining them, to keep the men left behind up to the still necessary work of searching the ruins.

They soon reached the spot where the villagers had seen the horsemen pass, and the tracker was laid like a bloodhound on the scent. And really the skill, or rather instinct, with which he followed it was as wonderful as that of the sleuth-hound in its palmiest days. At first the dents of the horses' feet were pretty clear, and Ravensmore himself could detect them. But after they got into the jungle, and the grass showed to the unpractised eye no sign of an impression, still the man went from point to point with the most remarkable decision.

But their pursuit seemed nevertheless far from hopeful. Quick and keen-sighted as the tracker was, still their progress could only be at a foot's pace. The jungle through which they passed was almost uninhabited, and there was no means of discovering which direction the fugitives had taken but by their footprints. The day wore on, and by noon they had made little over a dozen miles, while Grace's captors were no doubt long ago safe in the wild broken country, where it would be an almost desperate enterprise to trace them. Ravensmore's eager impatience could be restrained no longer; and leaving the tracker to proceed at leisure, he and the three young men who had followed him from Diknugger dashed off towards Gurhi Moofsid in the forlorn hope of obtaining some news of those of whom they were in search.

They were more fortunate than might have been expected. When they had ridden a few miles, and had nearly emerged from the further side of the jungle, they saw two horsemen and a group of men on foot at some distance in front of them. They were too far off for Ravensmore and his companions to observe whether they carried a prisoner with them, or whether they wore the dress and had the long tangled hair which distinguished the Moofsids. But from the direction, and the hurried pace in which they were going, it seemed likely that they were a party of the insurgents on their retreat. The pursuers advanced cautiously, making a circuit amongst the bushes, and so cut the party off, getting before them and taking up a position in ambush close to the line of their retreat.

As the men drew near it was seen that several among them were unquestionably Moofsids. The rest were probably blackguards from the open country, who had followed the Moofsid raid in hope of sharing their plunder. But they had neither Grace Hawthorn nor any other prisoner with them.

When they were opposite the place of ambush, Ravensmore and his allies rushed out, and calling upon them to halt, dashed at them at full speed. But short as the distance between the two parties was, the Moofsid horsmen were too alert and active for their would-be captors, and turning short round, made each for a different point in the jungle, and were hopelessly lost in the mazes ere Ravensmore could overtake them. While he followed these he very nearly let the footmen, scarcely less active than their mounted comrades, escape too. But one of his companions was prudent enough to devote his energies to the infantry, two of whom, a Moofsid and another man, he managed to secure.

Little could be got from the Moofsid, who answered all questions with a half-sullen half-defiant pretence at not understanding the questions. But the other man was moved at the sight of Ravensmore's revolver, and still more by the look of desperate determination to use it on small provocation which was manifest in the young officer's face, to be more communicative. But he could not tell much. He had not been at Zoolumkote nor the rest-house, but had joined this detached party of Moofsids as they passed his village on their way back, and had assisted them in plundering some of his friends the bunniahs in neighbouring villages. But whence the rest had come when he joined them, he had not thought it necessary to inquire. Asked as to the presence of a "Mem Sahib" with the party, he at first seemed quite abroad, and apparently could not understand what his interrogators were driving at.

"This is clearly not the party we are in search of," said one of Ravensmore's followers. "He is evidently speaking the truth, and knows nothing of the lady."

But Ravensmore's almost forlorn anxiety was not to be so easily convinced.

"The fellow may be shamming stupidity," he answered. "I believe he is. Now, you scoundrel," he exclaimed, with angry violence, suddenly bringing the muzzle of the revolver within an inch of the man's eye, "tell me where the girl is, or I will shoot you dead."

"O, mercy, Sahib!" cried the terrified prisoner, clutching at Ravensmore's knee. For God's sake! O, the girl? I will take you to where they left her, if you will spare my life. But I swear I had nothing to do with *that* business. I only took a handful of flour from a bunniah's shop, because I was starving. That is all I did. I had nothing to do with the ill-treatment of the girl, and would have protected her if I had dared."

With his dread and horror wrought up to the highest pitch by the ominous confession thus extorted by the man's abject terror, Ravensmore made him get up behind one of his followers and lead them to where Grace had been "left," as he had grimly expressed it. For his life Ravensmore could not ask a fuller explanation of that word; the question stuck in his throat when he tried.

They went several miles along the edge of the jungle until they came in sight of a village lying just on the debateable land between the wilderness and the cultivated country. While still a great way off it was easy to perceive that the place had undergone a thorough sack. No living soul appeared to be near it. The inhabitants had apparently fled in terror. Some of the houses were smoking ruins, and some cattle and a donkey lying here and there, either shot or hamstrung, bore witness to the brutal revel of wanton cruelty and destruction which had accompanied the more practical business of plundering.

A sickening horror overcame Ravensmore as his mind conjured up the scene of violence and worse which these indications too surely told of, and the thought of Grace Hawthorn having been present in it, helpless and unprotected.

His guide led them round to the other side of the village, and there, on the margin of the foul and miry cattle-pond, there lay something else than the carcasses of mutilated and butchered cattle. It was a slight, small object, which would not have been readily seen as it lay on the muddy bank, had it not been conspicuous from being clad in white muslin.

Ravensmore sickened at the sight, and reeled and almost fell from the saddle as he pulled up short. He covered his face with both hands in horror, and said to one of his companions, "Go and see. I *cannot*. But there may be life yet."

"No, Sahib," replied the guide. "The girl was quite dead before they left her."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OTHER FOLLOWS DUTY.

If the excitement of Ravensmore's chase was agonising, the dull, dangerless duty which had fallen to Shafto's lot, at a time when his mind was so distracted by doubts and fears about the fate of Grace Hawthorn, was a yet harder trial. Accompanied by a couple of mounted policemen, he made the best of his way towards the ferry indicated by Baytree; but as he galloped along his thoughts were far away from the mission on which he was bound. It was, indeed, so simple and safe a one that it needed no thought or care. All he had to do was to see that one of his orderlies got quickly across the river with Baytree's note to the Commissioner calling upon him for assistance. There was no chance of his being interrupted, for he knew that Dilawár Khan and his party, after destroying the boats at the ferry on the main road to Béshuckabad, had returned to Diknugger by Zoolumkote, and could not possibly, therefore, be anywhere in the direction in which his path lay.

One of his orderlies, a rough old soldier, being less highly educated than Shafto, and consequently less logical in his reasoning, did not appear quite so fully convinced of this irrefragable Q.E.D. He exchanged a hurried word or two with the country-people they met on the road, and what he heard caused him evident uneasiness with regard to the careless manner in which his officer was galloping forward. Shafto, it need not be said, was far too much absorbed in his own distressing thoughts to pay the least attention to his follower's hasty snatches of conversation with the passers-by. And even when the old fellow, riding up alongside of him, ventured to enjoin some little wariness in their mode of advance, Shafto's mind did not take in an atom of the sense of his words. The old man drew his horse back with a pious and philosophical reference to the will of Allah, and the little party galloped on as before.

Suddenly, as they dashed up to the edge of a wide depression in the surface of the ground, which had been an old bed of the river, they saw at the botton of the hollow, only a hundred yards before them, a band, or rather a rabble, of some hundred men, of whom, perhaps, ascore were mounted, and many more were armed with every variety of weapon, ranging from long rusty matchlocks to iron-bound clubs. We know from experience on a former occasion that Shafto's favourite Waler was never very well in hand. Now he was riding at a swinging gallop, with a loose rein, and had got fairly on to the downward slope before he was aware of the enemy in front. So by the time he succeeded in pulling up, scarce fifty paces separated him from Dilawár Khan's party. For Dilawár Khan's party in fact it was, as Shafto could not possibly doubt; for there was the half-insane young chief himself riding at their head. Even the wisdom of Baytree was liable to error; and he had quite forgotten to take into account the very obvious truth that, though *some* of the band which had burnt the boats on the Béshuckabad road ferry must have returned direct to the Zoolumkote rest-house in order to have done the same by it, it by no means followed that *all* had done so. He should have considered that others might have pushed on to secure the smaller ferry higher up the river. As a fact, Dilawár Khan, with the main body of his followers, had taken this latter course, and was now on his way to coöperate with his father's force in the attack upon the station, after having effectually cut off all means of communication between Diknugger and Béshuckabad.

When Shafto succeeded in halting he called out to the leader of the band, demanding to know what he meant by assembling this riotous crowd. Dilawár Khan's answer was to dash forward at the young police-officer, brandishing his tulwar, and followed by several of his mounted followers. Seeing this, Shafto drew his sword and went to meet his enemy half-way. He and Dilawár Khan rushed together, and each struck several violent blows. But to tell the truth, neither had had much practice as swordsmen in real action, though Shafto was a fair hand at single-stick, and the young Moofsid could cut a slice off a lemon without fail while galloping past it at full speed; and, unromantic and unheroic as it may sound, neither did the other the least harm. But one of Dilawár Khan's foot followers coming up, caught Shafto by the leg while he was engaged in parrying a sword-cut from another of the mounted men, and pitched him out of the saddle. Half a dozen clubs were instantly raised to knock him on the head ere he could raise it from the ground, and the thickness of his skull was likely to have been put to a ruder test than even when he dived head foremost into the nullah during the memorable chase after Grace Hawthorn's Arab; but Dilawár Khan himself interfered to save him. They were both keen sportsmen, and had spent many a hard day and night together in the jungles; and the memory of their comradeship restrained the fury of Dilawár Khan even at this time, when his normal semi-insanity had been converted, by excitement and success, into something like raving madness. So Shafto's life was spared, and he and his two followers were merely disarmed and made prisoners.

As he was led along with the mob back towards the station, Shafto attempted to learn from his captors something of Grace's fate. But they were quite ignorant even that the rest-house had been attacked. They told him that after the chief object of their incursion, the securing of the main ferry, had been accomplished, their leader did not consider so strong a force necessary to effect the seizure of the minor ferry, and had dismissed nearly half of his original Moofsid following to go direct to join his father's party. If the rest-house wantonly put itself in their way, Shafto's informants acknowledged, it was by no means unlikely that they might burn it down *en passant.*

As they neared the station the insurgents began to hear rumours from the villagers they caught and questioned, which seemed to have a decidedly sobering effect on the excitement of most of them, but only drove their leader into wilder transports of fury. It was said that Kumbukt Khan, with the main body, had been repulsed, and was already in full retreat towards Gurhi Moofsid. Shafto felt genuine joy at these tidings, which seemed to assure the safety of the ladies and children. But it must be confessed that they were not of a kind calculated to afford him any unalloyed delight. For it was in the highest degree improbable that Dilawár Khan's unaccustomed tenderness of heart, which had been strong enough to stand out against the intoxication of triumph, would be proof against the rage of disappointment and defeat. And the odds were great that he would manifest his disgust at the failure of his enterprise by cutting his prisoner's throat. Such an apprehension would, I say, have doubtless considerably alloyed the exultation with which Shafto heard of the enemy's retreat under any other circumstances. But now it is a fact that he was in such a depth of despondency that he cared little what might be his own fate. If, as he could not help acknowledging was all but certain, however much he strove against the conviction, Grace had been buried in the blazing ruins of the rest-house, why should he wish to survive so dreadful a catastrophe? And even if she were safe—and God grant she might be!—still *his* case was no better. Would not gratitude to the chivalrous lover, who had put all other considerations aside to fly to her rescue, blast for ever the last lingering hope of the cold-hearted rival, who, while her fate was worse than doubtful, had tried to run away towards Béshuckabad?

Making a wide detour, Dilawár Khan led his followers to that side of the station opposite which he should have found his father. And then the news of the latter's retreat was confirmed beyond a doubt. But instead of at once proceeding to the assassination of his prisoner, the young leader resolved to make one attempt to accomplish the object of his expedition. He led his men to the attack of the station by themselves; that is, he led as many as would follow. And though these included most of his own tribesmen who were with him, very few indeed of the volunteer auxiliaries who had joined him showed any stomach for an encounter with the muskets of the police.

Shafto was left behind well guarded, and saw nothing of the battle. It was a brief one. There was a rattling volley from Catcheside's men, supported by the Nawab's retainers, which, though it did no great damage, was quite enough even for the Moofsids, who turned tail, dragging their leader back along with them by main force.

The whole party at once, with one consent, Moofsids and auxiliaries, turned their backs resolutely on Diknugger. And now had come the moment when Shafto prepared himself for that separation of the thorax which he believed to be inevitable. And no doubt his anticipations would have been fully justified by the event, had not one of Dilawár Khan's followers been inspired at the critical moment with a happy thought.

"Let us not retire without doing some act of vengeance," shouted this doughty warrior. "If we can't break the gaol and loot the station, we can at any rate snatch back some of the plunder that our great enemy has been taking from us these twenty years, and clear off a score with him. The Nawab and most of his men are at Diknugger helping the Sahibs. Let us go and sack the *kila* of Zoolumkote."

This proposition was hailed with acclamation, and even Dilawár Khan was somewhat appeased by it. So the party set off towards the Nawab's castle, Shafto still accompanying them as a prisoner.

The castle was soon reached. There were but few men in it, the Nawab having taken the most efficient of his armed retainers, as he was wont, to swell his train on his visit to the station. Those inside shut to the ponderous iron-studded doors, which closed the great arched gateway. And the insurgents, with such weapons and implements as they had, could have made little impression against this obstacle. But as luck would have it, the Nawab was at that time rebuilding a part of the outer wall which had fallen into disrepair, and just at this particular juncture the work of demolition had been completed and that of reconstruction not begun. So there was an open breach twenty yards in the wall, the rubbish from which half filled up the ditch opposite to it. Through this opening the assailants thronged in, knocking over and trampling under foot a gallant old sepoy who, timidly backed by half a dozen others, made a show of opposition. The rest threw away their arms and ran as soon as they saw him fall. No other opposition of any kind was offered, and now the work of loot and destruction began.

The mob spread themselves over all parts of the building, beating or slaughtering without mercy all who fell in their way—old men, women, and children,—all, in a word, who had not possessed activity enough to escape from the place in time. There was, perhaps, a quarter of an hour of wild riot, confusion and noise, shouts and execrations, mingled with shrieks and fiendish laughter. Then arose, at first faint, but growing rapidly stronger, the smell of fire. Then volumes of smoke were seen issuing from the door and the unglazed windows of the great hall. And a minute or two later, with one sudden burst, the whole central pile of buildings became wrapped in flame. The fire had doubtless been kindled intentionally by some of the insurgents, and probably, indeed, by Dilawár Khan's own order. Nevertheless it placed numbers of his followers in imminent peril, as many of them were still engaged in searching and sacking the upper stories when it broke out. The confusion, which had been wild enough before, became now, from this circumstance, doubly redoubled; the frantic plunderers aloft yelling to their comrades below for help, cursing them because they could not or would not lend it, and leaping in desperation from the flame-licked balconies and turrets into the stone-paved court below.

While these scenes rapidly passed before him, Shafto had remained for some time perforce a passive spectator.

But as the plunder of the castle proceeded, his guards became more and more fidgety. It was not in a Moofsid's nature to see unmoved his brethren securing rich plunder while he was himself condemned to the profitless inaction of guarding a prisoner. They began to eye Shafto askance, and he in turn watched them not altogether without a quickening of the pulse. That they would very shortly abandon their guard, and leave him to himself, he felt quite sure. But whether they would leave him with an ungashed throat was a more doubtful question. Two of them handled their long knives ominously; and the scowls which gathered beneath their tangled locks and above their glittering eyes, as they whispered eagerly together, were not suggestive of hope. But the third, who was a personal attendant of Dilawár Khan, and had often accompanied him and Shafto on their shooting excursions, and received little kindnesses from the latter, stuck to him now. After a brief but vehement controversy, during which Shafto had self-control enough to sit perfectly still, instead of taking advantage of the preoccupation of his guards in their dispute to attempt an escape, which would have certainly ended in his being cut down, they led him into the inner court of the castle, and there leaving him unharmed, rushed off to secure their own share of the good things going.

He immediately caught up a tulwar, which had either been thrown down by one of the fugitive retainers, or dropped by some plunderer, who required all the hands with which Nature had endowed him to carry his booty. Then slipping into the outer courtyard during the confusion accompanying the first outbreak of the fire, he ran towards the breach. But he soon saw it would not be safe to attempt to escape that way, as numbers of the rioters were about. He therefore turned towards the opposite side, resolving to escape by dropping from the rampart into the ditch.

When he reached the wall he looked back for a moment to see how matters were going on before he leaped down, and his attention was caught by a little group of women who at that moment emerged from a small, scarcely notice-able back door of the block of buildings occupied by the zenana, and hurried, with the uncertain stumbling steps of frantic terror, towards an outhouse—a cowshed or something of the sort—at a little distance. They were doubtless the Nawab's wives and their attendants, who had hitherto contrived to conceal themselves in some hiding-place among the labyrinthine passages and apartments of the zenana, but now, either terrified by the fire or by the approach of the rioters to their hiding-place, had been forced to seek another refuge outside. But before the fluttering garments of the last of them disappeared through the door of the cowshed, it was too late. Three or four ruffians had followed them to the zenana wicket, just in time to discover their new place of refuge, and with a yell of savage laughter rushed towards it.

It was not in Shafto to turn his back on the horrors which must ensue from this discovery without an effort to avert them. He might not be able to do so; there were four men in pursuit of the women, only one of whom, fortunately, however, was armed with a sword. He could not hope to prevent their entrance into the shed sooner or later, and he must certainly sacrifice his own life. But there was just the bare chance that he might delay the ruffians for a minute or two, *and* that there might be some means of exit from the building on the other side, through which the women in the mean time could escape.

He was about as far from the door of the shed as the men were. But he was a good runner. He sprang from the rampart into the courtyard again, and reached the place just in time. His first blow, dealt before the men were aware of his presence, was by good luck more effectual than those with which a few hours before he had assailed Dilawár Khan. It stretched one of his opponents on the ground *hors de combat*. But still he had three powerful men to deal with, one armed like himself with a sword, and the other two with formidable clubs. They lost no time in setting upon him, but he put his back against the wall, and laid about him lustily. He got one or two nasty blows from the clubs, and after a time a slash across the neck with a tulwar, while he himself could not succeed in giving his adversaries a fair cut. At this rate it was evident that a few seconds more would see him done for. He resolved to change his tactics. Disregarding altogether the club-men who were on either side of him, he made a sudden spring forward at the swordsman who was in front, and having found the blade of the tulwar—in his hands at least—less effective than he could have wished, he now used the hilt instead, dashing it into his opponent's face with a good blow straight out from the shoulder. It caught the swordsman right between the eyes, and stretched him on his back. But Shafto was completely at the mercy of the other two men who were now behind him. Both had their hands raised above their heads, holding the clubs pointing downwards behind them, so as to be brought upon his unguarded head with a full swing. One club, that of the man on the left, did describe its swift semicircle, and descended, not, luckily, on Shafto's head, but on his shoulder, as he quickly turned from his prostrate foe in front to tackle him who was on the right. But this right-hand man's weapon encountered an unexpected obstacle to its destined course. One of the women had pluckily come out from the shed and caught hold of it from behind, just as its wielder was in the act of swinging it round. He turned instinctively to see who or what had hindered him, and that incautious movement was his destruction. For while his hands and weapon were encumbered and his face averted, Shafto cut him down. The fourth man, seeing no less than three of his companions laid low so rapidly, one after the other, declined further contest, and took to his heels.

"Grace!" exclaimed Shafto the moment after he had dealt his last stroke. "How, in Heaven's name, came you here?"

For it was indeed Grace Hawthorn, and no other, who had so opportunely caught hold of the right-hand man's club.

But there was no time for explanations, or even to wait for a reply to his question. The three fallen men were not, it was to be feared, killed so dead that they might not possibly repeat the miracle which, as we know on the unexceptionable testimony of Sir John Falstaff, was once accomplished by two slain men on Shrewsbury field. So calling to the other women who were still inside the shed to follow, he led Grace away. But how to get out of the castle now was the question. It was all very well for *him* to think of dropping twenty feet or so into the ditch, but he could scarcely expect the ladies to do this in safety. But as he was looking anxiously about for some place of concealment within the walls, a shrill panic-cry arose amongst the plunderers round the blazing pile of buildings in the centre of the enclosure, "The soldiers, the soldiers!" Then a general stampede was made towards the breach. A few minutes afterwards the great castle gate was swung open, there was a tremendous clattering of hoofs on the roughly-paved causeway, and presently a troop of hussars with flashing sabres appeared in the courtyard, and set diligently about cutting down such of the fugitive looters as had not been already fortunate enough to escape through the breach.

The native women who had been Grace's companions in flight being no longer in danger, Shafto left them to their own devices, and escaping with Grace from the confusion in the castle-yard, asked for an explanation of her unexpected appearance at Zoolumkote. It was soon given. The men who had set fire to the rest-house and carried her off were not Moofsids at all, nor attached in any way to Dilawár Khan's band, but were in reality scoundrels in the Nawab's service disguised as such. That youthful nobleman, as we know, had fallen in love with Grace at first sight, and he had ever since longed to possess the charms which had enraptured him. As long as Grace remained under the protection of the Commissioner, the Nawab would not have dreamt of committing an outrage. But when he saw her turned out, as was reported, in disgrace from Mr. Steel's household, and in attendance on the apothecary, who had also just been dismissed the service, the Nawab began tothink that there might be no very excessive danger in taking a little liberty with her. Grace, of course, could not account for, and Shafto could only guess at, the cause of the remarkable coincidence in the time selected by the Nawab for kidnapping her, and by Kumbukt Khan for attempting the rescue of his nephew. But the simple explanation of this came out not long after, and we may as well give it here. I have already mentioned that certain fakeers, who were very active in instigating the Moofsids to adopt some violent course, were in the pay of the Nawab, or rather of his Diwân; and these men naturally also kept their employer well informed of the progress of their endeavours. From them the Nawab and the Diwân had learnt in good time of the intended raid. And the former, taking advantage of the accident of Grace being at the rest-house at the opportune moment, hit upon the bright idea of contriving a little under-plot of his own as a supplement the more serious scheme of his Prime Minister. The burning of the rest-house was a necessary concomitant of the kidnapping of Miss Hawthorn, in order that it might be presumed that she had either perished in the flames, or been taken away and murdered in the wilds beyond Gurhi Moofsid; and that thus no search might be made for her, at all events in his direction. But in order the more effectually to divert suspicion from himself, he had taken care to be at Diknugger on the eventful night.

"From the moment I was free from those dreadful men, and was lodged safely in the zenana, Jack darling," said Grace (for I need say that in that moment, during which the end of the club was held down, and prevented from swinging round on the said Jack's darling head, a certain contract which had been for months in abeyance had been tacitly renewed), "I was treated very kindly. No one came near me but the women. O, how wonderfully God's providence orders all things for the best!"

"Yes, indeed, Grace," assented Shafto. "But I shall not forget, too, the debt of gratitude I owe to that old villain Baytree. But for him I should have been at this moment wandering all over the place in vain search of you; as, I suppose, poor Ravensmore actually is doing."

Before this Shafto had learnt from one of the Nawab's men, who had also by this time arrived with his lord at the castle, that Dr. Brandling was safe; and Grace was anxious to set off to the bungalow and see for herself how her father had endured the physical fatigue and mental anguish of the past twelve hours. Shafto got her a horse, and contrived a tolerable side-saddle by means of blankets. But he had one imperative duty to perform ere he left the castle. So, seating Grace upon the horse, and placing her in charge of an honest old native magistrate, who had also now appeared on the scene, to be conducted to the rest-house, and promising to overtake her in a few minutes, he returned to the courtyard and walked towards the still blazing buildings. There he found, as he had expected, the fat Nawab looking on at the destruction and spoliation of his gear in great tribulation. The ill-fortune which had befallen this young man might have moved Shafto to pity. But Shafto was a cool thinker, and he reflected that all the damage which the Moofsids had wrought their chief enemy would be more than counterbalanced by the advantage and gratification which he would derive from the utter and irretrievable ruin which must overwhelm the Gurhi Moofsid family after this escapade. Then doubtless the grave displeasure of the Government and of the Commissioner would fall upon the Nawab for his outrageous treatment of Miss Hawthorn, which could not possibly escape the notice of those authorities. But Shafto had a shrewd guess that the paramount expediency of hushing up a scandal—nay, he felt keenly that consideration for Grace's own feelings must prevent any very severe—which must necessarily be also a very public—punishment being meted out to the Nawab for his conduct on the present occasion. Therefore, taking these circumstances into consideration, Shafto not only did not pity the stout youth's hard case, but he thought he was pretty sure to get off altogether too easily, and he was firmly resolved accordingly to do what little in him lay to obviate such a failure of justice.

The Nawab had ridden home fast, and he still held in his hand the *châbook* or riding-whip with which he had urged his steed. Now the Indian *châbook* is an instrument in comparison with which the severest English jockey-whip is as a lady's riding-switch.

Shafto, walking calmly up to the Nawab, as he stood surrounded by his satellites, laid his left hand on the noble youth's collar, and his right on his *châbook;* and then, without a word of preface, proceeded to administer such a flogging as very quickly tore the victim's gaudy silken garments to shreds, and raised weals on his broad back, the marks of which would not disappear for many a year. The Nawab writhed and howled so that it was good to see and hear him. But at last the boldest of his retainers took heart of grace and attempted forcibly to interfere. Shafto was very savage at this. The scoundrel had not had half enough yet, but how could he administer the full tale of stripes with proper vigour while half a dozen men were tugging at his arms or grasping him round the waist? Exerting his full strength, and shaking himself free from them for a moment, while he held tenaciously to the Nawab, he slipped the *châbook* into his left hand, and with his right drew the tulwar, which he still carried stuck in his waistband. This action made them all recoil for a moment; but it was clear that they would return, and obstruct and annoy him as soon as he should put the weapon back. It was really very hard.

Just then a voice said in English, "Hullo! what game is up here?"

Shafto turned, and beheld the officer who commanded the detachment of hussars which had lately arrived.

"This young ruffian has had the insolence to attempt to carry off a young lady," said Shafto, "and I am giving him a little of what he deserves. Can't you keep these blackguards off me for a few minutes?"

"O, certainly," replied the officer affably. "No castigation can be too severe for a man who attempts to carry off young ladies. So lay on, Macduff! and I'll keep the ring clear for you."

Shafto briefly thanked the moral young officer who uttered this excellent sentiment, and proceeded with his task.

"Ah," said the officer complacently, when the operation was finished, and the Nawab lay bellowing and grovelling in the dust—"Ah, it is a pleasure to see a scamp who has attempted to commit such a disgraceful crime as carrying off a young lady so soundly punished. It does one good, I assure you."

And certainly it is to be hoped that the spectacle had done the speaker good; for he was no other than our old friend, Lieutenant Rattley Trapton!

This necessary duty performed, Shafto hurried after Miss Hawthorn.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END.

We have still to trace the adventures of one other of our chief characters during this eventful day. Notwithstanding the ill-success of Shafto's attempt to communicate with Béshuckabad, the Commissioner was not only early apprised of the occurrence of the disturbance at Diknugger, but was able to transport himself and a body of cavalry into the district without any undue delay at the river. The fact was that Dilawár Khan's followers' impatience to begin the work of destruction had defeated their own object. Had a party of them quietly crossed to the Béshuckabad side of the stream and seized unexpectedly the boats which were moored there, Mr. Steel would certainly have been detained till nightfall, if not till the following morning. But while the men who had started to secure the boats on the Béshuckabad side had been still in mid-stream, their comrades who were left on shore began to set fire to the huts of the boatmen on the Diknugger bank. This aroused the alarm of the boatmen on the Béshuckabad side, who, guessing that something was wrong, manned two of their boats and silently slipped with them down stream. At the same time a messenger was sent off to the nearest Tahsil. And thus, when the raiders arrived on that side to destroy the means of communication, it was too late. The alarm was already flying towards Béshuckabad, and the means of carrying the troops across the river were lying concealed under the dark bank half a mile down stream. So the Commissioner, accompanied by a detachment of horse, was able to cross into the disturbed district about noon.

The troops under Trapton pushed on direct to Zoolumkote; but Mr. Steel, being informed of the disaster at the rest-house, went thither first. He found Campion still employed in urging on the fruitless task of clearing the ruins. Indeed the wretched father had, notwithstanding that the weakness of disease had been aggravated by his having tasted no food since the previous evening, set to the work again with his own hands. Mr. Steel was shocked alike at his aspect and his demeanour; he thought that he was actually in delirium.

"Come, come, you must give this up," he said gently, taking Campion by the arm, and speaking, notwithstanding his aversion to the man, with deep sympathy.

"*You* tell me to give it up!" cried Campion, turning fiercely upon him. "*You*, who are the cause of this misery! Stand aside, I say, and leave me alone, at your peril."

"Your grief has rendered you distraught, sir," replied Steel. "How am I to blame? But I cannot resent anything you can say to me at such a moment."

"How are you to blame? Has it not been your doing, your contrivance, from first to last? Why did you give me my child but for this? Would to God that I had died in ignorance of her existence!"

"Could I foresee this awful fate?" said Steel, much moved. "Mother and daughter both to meet such terrible deaths! It is dreadful, but it is the will of Heaven."

"Was it the will of Heaven that you should rob me of my child these twenty years, and give her up to me in mockery only that I might see her destroyed before my eyes?" cried Campion. "No, it was the work of hell; it was the will of the serpent, whose fiendish subtlety has been the moving spirit of your line of craft and treachery."

"What do you mean—madman?" said Steel.

"It was your insidious arts which first cast the poison of jealousy between me and the mother," Campion went on with frenzied vehemence. "It was your dark whispers that beguiled her to flight. Did you suppose that I was ignorant that you met her in secret and under the cloud of darkness the very night before she fled from her father's house? What devilish lies you told her then to induce—"

"Lies, you scoundrel!" gasped the Commissioner, almost speechless, and perfectly livid with rage. "The lies were all your own, which, thank Heaven, there is evidence extant to prove!"

"You bewitched her with some foul sorcery, I say—some invention of hell, I know not what," Campion went on, unheeding the piously-ejaculated interruption. "You deceived me."

"There! there!" cried Steel. "Does not this prove the reckless insanity of your charges? And how, sir, did I ever deceive *you?*"

"Did you not leave the place at the very time when she disappeared, and hide yourself from all the world, in order to persuade me—pitiful dupe and idiot that I was—to slander in my thoughts the purest of women by believing that she had fled with you?"

"You could not have believed that."

"Ay," said Campion softly, dropping with startling abruptness the tone of loud and vehement fury in which he had hitherto spoken. "It may well seem incredible that I or any man endowed with reason and a conscience could have sunk to such a depth of brutish vileness as to harbour a thought so dishonouring to one who was clothed in truth as with a garment, and crowned with purity as with a halo of heavenly light. Nevertheless, it was so. That most foul thought found entrance into this accursed breast. It caused me to abandon to despair and destruction the woman who had given up all for the love of me. And then—then it changed, compelled by the stern power of that cold, still, white face to assume the real shape of the hell it emanated from—the shape of the worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched."

"You blame yourself justly, sir," said Steel, "for your own self-deception, if indeed you were deceived. I pity your remorse, which, I doubt not, has been bitter; and from my heart I sympathise with your present calamity. But I cannot allow even the violence of your grief to excuse—"

"At least," cried Campion, resuming his former vehement tone, "at least you cannot deny that this lies at your door. What right had you to steal and hide away a child from her own father?"

"I did it for the best," was Mr. Steel's somewhat lame defence.

"No, you did it for the worst. The vindictiveness of your miserable wounded vanity could not be appeased even by death."

"I tell you, maniac! if you have sufficient reason left to understand a plain statement—I had no ground to suppose that the seducer who had left the mother to starvation or suicide would trouble himself with the care of the child. Nor can I be blamed for thinking that such a man was no fit guardian for a young girl."

"But you considered yourself an unexceptionable one. Hypocrite! You pretend a great reverence for law, when it is employed by greedy usurers to wring the life-blood from starving peasants. Did it never occur to you that keeping my child concealed under a false name was an offence against the law of the country, as well as against that of nature and of Heaven?"

"Nothing of the kind," answered the Commissioner, piqued at this view of the case being presented. "A father has no more legal right to the custody of an illegitimate child than—"

"Illegitimate child!" thundered Campion, making a spring towards Steel, as if he would have strangled him. "How dare you utter—"

"Hullo, doctor!" cried a cheery voice at this moment; and Shafto, coming round the corner of the blackened wall at a run, seized the ex-civil surgeon by the hand, and shook it as if he would have wrung it off.

At sight of him Campion's feelings, which had been strung to an unnatural pitch beyond what it was possible that his enfeebled strength could sustain long, suffered a complete revulsion. He sank his head on the young man's shoulder, and, with a sob which shook his frame, murmured, "O Shafto, never again!"

"Yes, yes," replied Shafto. "Indeed you shall see her again, and that even now. Look up—look up!"

Campion raised his head with wild surprise, and the next moment father and daughter were locked in each other's arms.

"We had better leave them alone," said Mr. Steel. And he and Shafto walked towards the little arbour at the bottom of the garden, where, it may be remembered, Shafto and Grace had had an interview when they first visited this fateful rest-house together. "You can tell me now," said the Commissioner, "how things have gone, so far as you know, and then I will go on to Diknugger."

They had not been many minutes talking together in the arbour, when Grace and Colonel Campion rejoined them.

"I have no more reproaches to utter, Mr. Steel," said Campion. "Whatever wrongs you may have done me, I can *now* at any rate freely forgive. But there is one matter which must be explained, and that without another moment's delay. Have you led my daughter to believe what your words expressed just now? Has she been taught to do her unfortunate mother's memory this cruel injustice in her thoughts for so many long years? Grace, for the future at least, know that you have as full a right to the name of Campion as I have, and that the love which Providence in its wisdom has decreed that you should be able to pay only to a mother's grave may be laid there unsullied by one thought of shame."

This declaration, satisfactory to all parties concerned, as one might have supposed, seemed to agitate Mr. Steel strangely.

"I wish I could believe it," he said, in a hurried nervous manner. "But it cannot be—it is impossible. Is this miserable history to be marked by your falsehood to the very end?"

Campion's eyes gleamed, but he restrained himself. Joy at his daughter's unlooked-for safety left little room in his breast now for angry passions.

"Mr. Steel," he said, "I will not at the moment when Heaven has vouchsafed me so inestimable, so unlooked-for, and so undeserved a mercy, be provoked again to anger. And it is only a part of my just punishment for the base and insane suspicion which consigned one so pure and innocent to a cruel fate, that I should be called upon solemnly to assure my own child that her mother was my wife. You may remember, Mr. Steel, that after a severe illness Miss Lee was invited to spend a few weeks with a lady who lived in the neighbourhood of her father's parish. We took advantage of the opportunity, and were married at ——" (naming a large manufacturing town). "I selfishly insisted, my child, that the marriage should be kept secret, knowing that my father would disapprove of it, and might disinherit me in consequence. At first she made no objection. But as months passed, and I still with despicable cowardice put off the inevitable task of announcing my marriage to my parents, she became importunate. Then angry scenes took place between us, and bitter reproaches and retorts. During one of these—I must confess it, though in doing so I risk my last hopes of earthly comfort—she threatened to go and present herself to my parents as their son's wife. Stung to madness by her too just taunts and by the consciousness of my own mean cowardice, I spoke words which in the day when the Recording Angel's volume is opened shall be found written there in characters of blasting fire. I told her that she would find it hard to prove the marriage, as I had necessarily given a false description of her to obtain the license for one who was so palpably under age, and that she knew not where to find the witnesses—nay, that she probably knew not even the name of the town to which I had taken her for the purpose."

"You are a precious villain, sir, even according to your own account," said Mr. Steel. "It may seem cruel to say it in your daughter's presence, but I owe a duty to myself also. I have to vindicate my own acts. And I say I have even now no assurance—indeed, there is still every ground for regarding it as most improbable—that you were married to Mary Lee. Had there been even the smallest reason to suppose so, I never would have—"

He stopped abruptly. He had been speaking with great rapidity and excitement.

"You would never have done what?" asked Grace. The intensity of her interest in the conversation may be more readily imagined than described. But she had hitherto not uttered a word or an exclamation.

"Colonel Campion," replied Mr. Steel, collecting himself, "has reproached me with having withheld you from him for so long. I say, had there been the slightest reason for supposing that your mother had been his wife, I should not have been justified in this."

"You were not justified," said Grace. She spoke reproachfully, but very gently. "I feel that you have done me a great wrong. But I believe you did it with no other thought than my own good. I know now that you were wrong. I am not the less grateful for all you have done, and all you wished to do for me; but in that you have done me an irreparable wrong."

Mr. Steel was the last man to approve of being lectured and forgiven by his *protégée.*

"You have no right to say that," he answered. "You may feel resentment at having been separated so long from a wealthy parent who, as it now turns out, is willing to receive and acknowledge you as his daughter. But remember that I could only judge of this man's probable conduct towards you by the way in which he had treated your mother—by the heartless cynicism, the insulting levity of that disgraceful letter, in which he plainly told her that he cast her off for ever, and by the—"

"What letter?" exclaimed Campion. "I never sent her any such letter. If any such was sent to her," he continued, in a voice of increasing emotion, as a light seemed to flash on his mind, "it must have been a forgery, and may account for her flight, which, after my first mad suspicion of its cause was dissipated, has always been to me utterly inexplicable."

"It was no forgery, sir," said the Commissioner sternly; "and of that you may convince yourself by the evidence of your own eyes. Your daughter has the letter in her possession."

Campion looked eagerly at Grace, who, with fingers trembling so violently that she could hardly perform the task, drew from the bosom of her dress the little packet which she always wore there. It contained the two letters which her guardian had given her at different times: poor Mary Lee's frantic summons to Mr. George to meet her in the churchyard, which he had given to Grace on the Sunday when Bella's delinquencies had led to their first conversation about her mother; and the hastily-scrawled scrap which Mrs. Potts of The Good Intent had deposited by the gravestone, and which Mr. Steel, it will be remembered, had handed to Grace on the occasion of his second and full account of Mary Lee's story in Mrs. Archer's drawing-room. Grace took the latter document from the envelope, and held it out in silence. Campion seized it and glanced at it.

"Ay, this is the last letter I wrote to her," he muttered. "I remember the circumstance as if it were yesterday—the difficulty there was to find me writing-materials in the little roadside inn, the crumpled sheet of flimsy foreign paper, the rusty magnum bonum pen, the soiled envelope, and the wafer, which were the best that the landlord could at last produce."

He read the letter over. As the reader may not have a very accurate recollection of its contents, I will, for convenience' sake, again transcribe them here:

"My Darling,—I had no time to write from home, and am just snatching a few minutes while waiting at the inn here for the coach which is to carry me the first stage on my journey to the Continent.

"The gods are certainly against us. Fancy my disgust on reaching the Hall to find my mother absent, and my father in the torments of gout and the very devil of a temper. Of course I said nothing about our marriage. It would have been sheer madness. Worse! it would have been nothing short of parricide, as he would certainly have died of rage and apoplexy—but not so suddenly as not to have time to alter his will first. So you yourself must admit that there is nothing for it but to give up my heart's darling, however hard the struggle may be. The chance of obtaining my parents' consent I always looked upon as a forlorn hope, and without it we can look forward to nothing but penury. But there is no controlling fate, Mary, and we must both of us just grin and bear our lot.

"By the bye, my lawyer uncle is staying at the Hall. We dined together alone, and I asked some fishing questions. I much fear we bungled that little business at ——, and it was quite worthless. Here comes the coach; good-bye, pet. Let us hope for better times some day, though the present is so gloomy. And as to what happened at ——, why, as the Scotch song says, 'if it wasna' weel bobbit, we'll bob it again' one of these days.

"J. C."

Campion read the letter through, and as he did so a look of dismay and perplexity overspread his face. Grace, who watched it earnestly, and had perhaps cherished the hope that he would again indignantly repudiate the writing as a forgery, was bitterly disappointed.

"There is something wrong here," was all he could stammer out.

"Well, sir," said Mr. Steel, "I have only one plain question to ask, and when that is answered, ay or no, this wretched business may be closed for ever, so far as I am concerned—I will say or hear not another word about it. I ask you, once for all, is this your handwriting?"

"I cannot deny it. It is my handwriting; it is my very letter. I have a thousand times striven to recall to mind what I wrote, in the endeavour to find some unfortunate turn of expression which she might by possibility have misunderstood, and which might have prompted her strange conduct. I recognise much here that I remember writing. And yet, though it is the same in form, some infernal magic seems to have completely changed its sense."

"Enough. Then my part is over, and I leave you," said Mr. Steel with dignity; and walked towards the door of the arbour.

"But stay," said Campion. "This is only half a sheet. Where is the other leaf?"

"Bah! this shuffling is too sickening," remarked the Commissioner; and added, with scornful irony, "Your postscript on the other side (which is so unhappily missing) explained, I presume, that all that is written here was a merry jest. It was a sad mischance that both the unfortunate girl to whom the letter was addressed and I overlooked this important postscript."

Shafto, although he had kept in the background during this scene, had not been able to bring himself to go out of earshot of a conversation which so nearly concerned Grace, as perhaps strict delicacy should have prompted him to do. He now whispered to Grace, "Is that paper which you have given to your father the same which I found lying on the floor of this arbour when we spoke together here in January, which I handed to you, and which you at first said was not yours?"

"No; this was given to me by Mr. Steel months after that."

"Then if they are not the same, they must be twin brothers. The paper, the scratchy writing, the faded colour of the ink, all make up a strange family likeness. If you did not remove that scrap of paper from the niche where I put it that day, it must be there still."

He stepped towards the little cleft behind the door-post of the summer-house, where, it may be remembered, he had put the piece of paper he picked up on the occasion referred to, intending to take it away again when he left and return it to Brandling, to whom he supposed, from the handwriting, that it belonged. Mr. Steel at the same moment reached the door on his way out. He paused for a moment, and said, "Shafto, you had better come with me. I am going now to Zoolumkote, and then on to Diknugger."

"Wait two seconds," replied Shafto, feeling about for the paper. "Ah, here it is, sure enough."

"What are you about, and what is that you have got?" said the Commissioner.

But Shafto, without answering, handed the paper he had just extracted from its hiding-place to Grace. She eagerly unfolded it, and sure enough, as Shafto had observed, there was a most striking family likeness between it and the other piece of paper which Campion was still turning over and over, and reading and re-reading in hopeless perplexity. It also was only half a sheet of the same flimsy foreign paper, and, except that the writing covered only one side instead of both, appeared from a little distance to be the exact counterpart of the other.

"What is that you are doing?" again asked Mr. Steel. Grace's back was turned to him, and he had not caught sight of what Shafto had given her.

She had scarcely glanced at the writing when she exclaimed, reëchoing, in a tone which seemed to thrill through every one of her hearers, the words which her father had used just before.

"Infernal magic! Ay, indeed! O, my murdered mother! may the bitter curse of a girl most foully deceived cling for ever to the vile wretch who betrayed your trust!"

"Child, forbear, forbear!" exclaimed Mr. Steel, horror-struck by this sudden outburst of imprecation, of which he could not guess the cause. "Remember, he is your father."

"My father!" said Grace, turning fiercely upon the speaker. "*You* are the object of my curse. *You*, whose devilish cunning changed the sense of this letter from honey to gall!"

"Girl, you are beside yourself!" cried Mr. Steel.

"You were with my mother when she received this letter. You delivered it to her with your own hands. You told me so yourself."

"Well?"

"But before delivering it you opened it, and you tampered with it so as to make it convey the very opposite meaning to that which it originally had."

"How *could* I do so? The letter was not in my hands five minutes, and in a place where no writing-materials could possibly have been obtained."

"You tore one half off, and only delivered the other half. You thought your paltry trick was a safe one, and could never be proved against you, as a bold forgery might. But Heaven would not allow such mean treachery impunity for ever, and has thus wonderfully brought the missing sheet to light in this very place. Here it is."

"It is a counterfeit," cried Steel, in a husky voice, while the perspiration stood in great drops upon his forehead, from which, as well as from his cheeks and quivering lips, every tint of colour had vanished. "It is physically impossible that this can be the other half of that letter, I tell you, for I destroyed—I mean—"

"Ay, what was it you destroyed?" asked Grace. "And you," she went on, in a voice of fiery indignation, under which the Commissioner quailed and cowered—"and you have dared over and over again to denounce to me with every term of scorn and contumely—to denounce to me, the child of the woman you pretend to have loved, my father, whom you knew to be innocent of the falsehood and treachery that you attributed to him, and which existed only in your own black heart. Slanderous hypocrite!"

Grace then took the other half-sheet of paper from Campion's hand, and laid the two side by side on the little rustic seat. It was manifest in a moment that they were halves of the same sheet. And the method of the trick which had been passed on the unhappy Mary Lee was equally readily apparent. Campion, writing at the roadside inn, where he had found difficulty in obtaining writing-materials of any kind, had evidently been without blotting-paper. And being hurried, he had, after filling the first page of the sheet, instead of going on to the second, which would have necessitated his laying the side on which the ink was still wet downwards on the table, passed over to the third page; after covering which, he had turned back and finished his letter on the second page. The same half-sheet therefore contained both the beginning and end of the letter. And as it so chanced that the broken sentence at the bottom of the first page and the broken sentence at the top of the second page fitted into each other so as to make sense, the removal of the second half-sheet left an apparently complete letter.

The first page ended with the words, "So you yourself must admit that there is nothing for it but to—"

The writing on the second half-sheet, now discovered by Shafto, ran as follows:

"—follow my mother to Rome, where she has gone, and try my eloquence with her. This, of course, must considerably delay my promised return. But you must be patient and *true*. You know it is not without reason I have to underline that word. However, for the present, a certain meddling coxcomb you wot of has, I hope, got what will make him less ready to poach on other people's preserves. Mind, I am far from satisfied with your explanation of your intercourse and relations with that young man. I hope you are true to your troth, Mary; but Heaven knows I have sometimes thought I had reason to doubt it. For myself, I know my own heart, and you shall never have cause to falter in your trust in me. I am yours, and yours only, till death; for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse. Come what may—through beggary and shame, if it must needs be so—I will never—"

And here the bottom of the page was reached. Then the second page began with the words—"give up my heart's darling, however hard the struggle may be."

As Campion and his daughter, stooping over the seat on which the latter had laid the papers, read the words together, they paid little further attention to Mr. Steel. Shafto, though he had gained some clue to the mystery of Grace's connection with Brandling from the doctor's wild utterances during his delirium, was still quite at a loss to guess at the import of the letter which seemed so deeply to affect all his three companions. As he turned in bewilderment from Grace and her father to seek some enlightenment from the Commissioner's countenance, he was absolutely shocked at the change which had passed over it. The usually calm, grave, and imperturbable visage was distorted by the workings of helpless agitation. Twenty additional years of age seemed in a moment to have fallen upon the head that was wont to be held so erect, and the slight figure lately so firm and elastic. The mouth was vainly moving, as if Mr. Steel were endeavouring to speak words which the parched tongue and lips refused to utter. The sight was so pitiable that Shafto turned away; and feeling now that he had no right to be longer present, he left the arbour.

As soon as she had read the now completed letter, Grace threw herself sobbing on her father's breast. The grim old soldier hugged the girl to his heart with the energy of feelings pent up for half a lifetime; and then, overcome by the varied exertions and emotions of the day, sank down on the bench utterly exhausted, while Grace bent over him, grasping his thin brown hand in a transport of rapturous love mingled with anxiety.

In the mean time Mr. Steel was able to call up some of his habitual self-command unobserved. Yet when he spoke his voice was strangely husky.

"Miss Hawthorn—I should say Miss Campion—you have discovered (by what means I am unable to guess, and I do not care to inquire) a deception that the terrible dilemma in which your mother had involved herself compelled me to practise. It is not for me to excuse my act either to the man whose villany it was done to counteract, or to the child for whom I alone, of all the world, cared enough to seek her out in the squalid hovel in which she pined, and would, in all human probability, have soon died a deserted and famished infant, and who now repays that care with—curses!"

"Forgive me," murmured Grace; "I spoke in a moment of passion."

"I make no complaint," Mr. Steel went on, with meek dignity. "We now part for ever. As to what I have done, and my motives for doing it, I can answer to Heaven and my own conscience. It is enough for me to say here that the weakness of the being whom I was called upon to rescue, and the cruelty and treachery of the designs from which I had to rescue her, were, in my opinion, an ample warrant for all I did."

"You have no longer any right to speak of cruelty or treachery!" exclaimed Grace, again flaring up. "Your error may have been excusable then. But now that you have had the proof that it *was* an error, to repeat it is a foul slander!"

"The proof is not so full as you think it to be. I would indeed, for your sake, that it were so."

"The proofs of my marriage," interposed Campion, "can easily be made as full as any court of justice could require. And I will take care that they are sent to you."

"I do not want them," replied Steel. "I now turn down and close for ever this most painful page in my past life. I blot out the very names of Mary Lee and Grace Hawthorn from my thoughts, and I pray to God that they may never be recalled."

"But," pleaded Grace, with all the wonted tenderness restored to her sweet voice, "I cannot blot out *your* name—I cannot cast away the love and reverence which has grown up in my heart from childhood. So, for my sake, you should consent to receive the proofs which my father offers."

"My dear Grace," said the Commissioner, in a softer tone, "with regard to the marriage, I am only too willing to believe it on Colonel Campion's own assertion, although the firm conviction that there had been none was the best justification of the course which I took in a crisis of great difficulty. But, alas, there are other circumstances which his explanation has not even touched."

"What circumstances?"

"Nay, do not ask me. You have decided, and doubtless rightly, to cast in your lot with your father. It is best to let the dead past sleep henceforth. Now we part for ever. God bless and keep you, Grace!"

"No, no," she said. "You cannot leave me thus after what you have said. What circumstances are still unexplained? I have the right to know, and I insist."

"Unhappy girl!" replied Steel. "Be content. Let the matter rest here."

"No. It is best that my confession should be made fully once for all," said Campion. "My actions at that time were, indeed, one tissue of selfishness and cowardice, the mere confession of which in detail could avail neither the living nor the dead. But I would not willingly leave anything now unexplained that admits of explanation."

"You force me to speak, then," answered Steel. "Be it so. You have explained your conduct *before* the unhappy girl's flight. You have even attempted to explain, by the pretence of suspecting me, your conduct during her concealment. But there remains your conduct *after* her return to Slagby yet to be accounted for."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean!" cried the Commissioner, again stirred to most righteous anger. "How do you account for the savage brutality with which you were seen to repulse the agonised prayers of the woman—of your own wife, as you now tell us, whom you had vowed at the altar to love and cherish? How do you account—cowardly ruffian!—for the dastard blow which felled her to the ground?"

"What are you speaking of?" said Campion. "You are under some strange delusion."

"What, sir? Do you mean to say that you carried your cynical indifference to your victim's fate so far that you did not even trouble to inquire what evidence there was against you? Do you tell me that you do not know that you were seen—that a witness came forward at the inquest to depose that he had seen you on the river-bank—on the very fatal spot—actually strike—actually strike to the ground—"

"Do you mean to say that you—that any one ever supposed that *I* was that man?" asked Campion, in horror.

"Who else, then, was it?" cried Steel. "Who else could it have been? Is this, too, a part which your ingenious suspicions have assigned to *me?* You have told me you supposed me to be the seducer of Mary Lee. Are you going to pretend that I was her murderer also?"

"I thought it was well known," said Campion quietly, "that that point—at first, I know, regarded as doubtful and perplexing—had been cleared up. Is it possible that you do not know that the man with whom my unfortunate wife was last seen was her father? He had walked to Puddleborough that day, and she had waited for him by the roadside on his way back. Owing to his sudden and fatal illness on hearing the news of her death, and the state of confusion into which the household at the Parsonage was thrown, this fact was not ascertained at first; but ample evidence of it was found by the magistrates, who, at my instance, afterwards made further inquiry."

"Her father, was it?" said Mr. Steel. "That idea never struck me. It accounts, indeed, for many circumstances which seemed incomprehensible on any other theory. But I must say, a doubt never entered my mind as to your being the man. You were seen at the place, that is, at the inn, on the very morning."

"Yes. On my return from the Crimea very shortly before, I saw reason to doubt the truth of my first most unworthy and unpardonable assumption as to the cause of my wife's flight. And as the first step towards discovering the truth, I employed persons to watch you. These agents followed you to the place where she had last lived immediately after you yourself had discovered it, and brought me the same information that you yourself had learnt—except with regard to the child; most unhappily they told me nothing of her existence. I came to the same conclusion that I presume you did, that she had returned to her father's house; and I followed her there. I reached the little public-house, which had been my former lodging, on the very morning of the fatal day. The landlady, who was the only person in the neighbourhood who had been in our secret, had heard no rumour of Mary's return. I went out and spent the whole day in making inquiries in all directions—at Slagby, in Puddleborough, in the hamlets round, and even amongst the servants at Mr. Crovesworth's residence, Goldmore Hall—but without result. Late at night, still completely ignorant of the awful occurrence of the afternoon, I returned to The Good Intent. The place was, as usual, at that hour silent, and no one was about; but a light burned in the parlour. I presumed that it had been left burning for me, and went into the room. The people who had been left to watch had apparently preferred to occupy an adjoining room, and were doubtless asleep. For the parlour had only *one* occupant."

The speaker stopped, overcome, as may well be imagined, by the memory of that dread meeting. He covered his face with his hands, and his head sank forward on his knees, as he sat on the rough bench. Grace dropped on her knees by his side, and put her arm round him.

"Was she there?" she asked, in a low, awe-struck voice.

He lifted his head and went on: "Yes, my child. The shock must to any one have been terrible—so unexpected, at such a time, in such a place. But I knew the instant I entered the room, and that solemn ghostly form met my sight, I knew by presentiment, by conscience, that there beneath that white shroud lay the corpse of my love and of my earthly happiness."

"Did you—did you—what did you do, father?" asked Grace, with intense interest.

"Yes, my child, I did. Once again we were clasped in one long last embrace. And then I went forth like Cain. But Heaven has extended to me the mercy that I never hoped or even dared to pray for; and I have found rest and peace at least a little way on this side of the dark river on whose further shore I humbly hope I shall meet *her* again."

Business must be attended to sooner or later, though disclosures and explanations ever so nearly touching one's innermost life and feelings may be going forward. And Mr. Steel, after riding post-haste from Béshuckabad, had certainly loitered a most unconscionable time in the little arbour, where no public duties whatever required his presence. So now it was more than high time for him and Shafto to go and see how matters were progressing in the outer world. He therefore left the place, and the two old rivals for poor Mary Lee's fickle affections looked upon each other for the last time in their lives. Ere they parted, Campion held out his hand to Steel.

"You did me a great injury," he said, "but you have also done an inestimable service. Had I had my child to comfort my lonely lot through these past years, there would have been a gleam of sunshine in a life which has been one of unbroken gloom. But perhaps in that case I should not have undertaken or carried through such atoning labours as God has given me strength for, and which I hope may be accepted as some payment for the irreparable wrong I wrought one most innocent of His creatures. And as for Grace, whatever portion of her lovable qualities may have been the gift of nature or an inheritance from her dear mother, I cannot but acknowledge that had her childhood been passed under the influence of a broken-hearted, restless, and remorseful man like myself, she could never have grown up to be what she is. If your guardianship of her has been a wrong to me, it has been full of advantage to her, and I sincerely thank you for it."

Mr. Steel took the proffered hand, but not cordially.

"I am glad," he said, "that that sad story has, by the explanations you have been able to give to-day, been deprived of some of its worst features. You say I have done you an injury. It may be so. I myself was deeply, most deeply injured. I too claim that I have done what I could to atone for any evil which may have been caused through my errors in judgment."

His farewell to Grace was less cold, but very brief.

"Thank you," she said, "for all you have done for me, and forgive the words I spoke in my anger. Please tell Mrs. Steel I beg her pardon for whatever pain my petulance may have caused her. And give my fondest love to dear Bella. I shall always pray for her happiness and yours."

"God bless you, Grace," was Mr. Steel's only reply.

After he had left the arbour, accompanied by Shafto, the father and daughter sat side by side in silence for some time, lovingly clasping each other's hands. At last Grace said,

"I am so thankful, father, that it was you who saved Bella Steel from that dreadful Trapton."

"Yes," replied Campion, "that at least was something in requital of Mr. Steel's care of you, my child. Do you know, I was induced to make my journey that night, in the course of which I met Miss Steel, by a very strange occurrence. I was on my way in exactly the opposite direction, having left Gurhi Moofsid that morning with the intention of returning to Diknugger, and at once resigning my appointment. But I was troubled in mind, for I had left my work among the poor sick people, because my own selfish pride had been hurt. Conscience urged me to return to the work to which I had set my hand, and which I had no right to leave in the moment of emergency. But I could not do so without humbling myself in a way at which my pride revolted. I was resting for the night at the little bungalow on the Rungrootpore road. And as I paced up and down in the tumult of my mental strife, I saw—I thought I saw your mother, Grace, drooping and wan as I had last seen her in life, leaning against a pillar of the verandah in the moonlight. I knew she had come to recall me to the task of atonement which I was ready to abandon. I at once returned towards Gurhi Moofsid, and thus it chanced that I met Miss Steel."

"It was me you saw that night, father," said Grace. "Mr. Ravensmore and I had driven so far along the road in pursuit of Bella. He went to the police-station to make inquiries, but to avoid exciting curiosity I waited for him by the bungalow, not knowing that any one was in it. I was tired, and very, very wretched about Bella, and I daresay I looked sad enough."

And now my story is done. It is scarcely necessary to tell how Shafto married Grace Campion, and how he and his wife established themselves along with his father-in-law at Beechly Park. The Colonel did not live many years to enjoy his new-found peace of mind and domestic happiness. But his bones do not rest with those of his fathers in the vault of the Campions; they lie under the green sod and brown heather which contend for mastery in the desolate churchyard on the bleak hillside at Slagby.

Perhaps the reader may reasonably look for a word of explanation on two points before he closes the book. First, how it was that a man so punctiliously honourable as Mr. Steel could have committed so mean an act as to tamper with a letter? Second, how did the missing half-sheet find its way from Slagby churchyard into the arbour in the Zoolumkote rest-house garden? But in both cases I can offer nothing more than conjecture.

It must not be forgotten that when chance placed this letter in George Steel's hands on the fatal night of his meeting with Mary Lee in the churchyard, his mind was tempest-tossed by more than one passion, and (to put it in the mildest terms) was off its normal balance. Except for this it is incredible that he should have deceived himself by the transparent sophism that the weakness of the victim he was called upon to rescue, and the unscrupulous seducer he had to combat, justified him in turning the latter's own weapon of fraud against him. But in the state of mind in which he was he probably argued somewhat in this wise: Chance had made him the bearer of a letter which he believed would be the instrument designed for the consummation of Mary's ruin. If he delivered these insidious promises to her, would he not himself help in luring her into the snare from which he had come to save her? Where the victim's own credulity was the chief means to be employed for her destruction, he was surely more than justified in protecting it from being practised on.

As to the other point, how the missing half of the letter had turned up so opportunely, my own private idea is this: that Steel, when he had torn it off, hid it away hurriedly in the receptacle which happened at the moment to be most handy, which was the envelope of Mary's letter summoning him to meet her; but that, in the absorbing agitation consequent on his crime and the events which followed, he quite forgot what he had done, and afterwards, not finding the paper, took it for granted that he had destroyed it. It may be remembered that, though he had kept Mary's letter, he had never dared again to take it from its envelope to read it. And as the concealed half-sheet was very thin, and probably folded up small, it may easily have escaped Grace's notice, and remained in the envelope on the many occasions when she took her mother's letter out, until the day of her first visit to the arbour, when, as she took out Mary Lee's letter, she had pulled out Pearson's along with it, but had let it fall unobserved. This, I say, is my theory of how the thing happened; but if any reader's ingenuity can hit upon a better one, he is quite welcome to adopt it.

Mr. Steel did not, after all, become Lieutenant-Governor of the Mâ Bâp Provinces. So he came home in disgust in the same ship with Sir Duncan MacTullub, and now lives in South Kensington. He is a good deal changed, and has become crusty and short-tempered. The proprietor of the principal butcher's shop in the vicinity of their residence, in the course of a little discussion held the other day with Mrs. Steel, informed the ex-Commissioner's wife, in the presence of some half-dozen customers, that she was "no lady"—which opinion it would appear from certain hints, recorded in an earlier chapter of this narrative, he holds in common with that well-known ornament of London, and erst of Simla, society, the Countess of Feathertop—which goes a great way to show that there is much more sympathy and unity of sentiment than some people suppose between the higher and lower orders in this country.

Bella's sunny presence does not light up the somewhat dull and dreary establishment in Queen's Gate. She at any rate has put it out of the power of any butcher or baker or candlestick-maker, or other rude person, to say she is no lady, by acquiring an indefeasible legal right to that title. She married Sir Ruby Carr, her father's chum at Haileybury, when that respected member of the Council of the Viceroy and Governor-General had been a widower six months.

Charles Ravensmore left the Indian service immediately after the final disappointment of his hopes of winning Grace. He is now in Parliament, and still unmarried. I met him at Beechly once, when I did not form a high opinion of his social qualities. He was decidedly dull.

He did, however, on that occasion tell me one story which interested me much. It was the history of his fruitless pursuit of the Moofsids who were supposed to have carried Grace off. And I must here confess, with deep contrition, that in telling me this story, he treated me better than I have done my much-abused readers in the repetition of it; for he did not break off the narrative at the critical moment when he first caught sight of the dead girl lying on the bank of the village pond, but went on at once to tell me that, although he and his compaions at first believed it was her whom they sought, a closer approach quickly undeceived them. It was the body of a poor child whom the rioters had murdered when they had plundered her home.

Baytree still flourishes. He has now stepped into Mr. Steel's shoes as Commissioner of Béshuckabad. He is a terror to evil-doers in the way of deputy-commissioners who attempt to depart one hair's-breadth from the strict rules of Justice, Equity, and the Accountant-General.

THE END.

Stirling, January 1894.

CHEAP UNIFORM EDITION OF NOVELS BY "RITA"

THE Publishers have the pleasure to announce that they have arranged for the production of a Cheap Uniform Edition of "RITA'S" Novels, all of which will appear in regular succession on alternate months. Probably no series of works of fiction of equal merit and popularity have been so long detained in their original and costly form of publication. It is therefore confidently hoped that the proposed issue, in Two-Shilling Volumes, carefully printed upon good paper, and neatly bound in characteristic picture boards, or in cloth gilt at 2*s.* 6*d.*, or half morocco at 3*s.* 6*d.*, will be welcomed throughout the length and breadth of the land, and will carry amusement and comfort into many a distant home, to many a yearning heart.

Price 2s., Picture Boards; 2s. 6d., Cloth Gilt; 3s. 6d., Half Morocco. (Postage 4d. each.)

DAME DURDEN

"'Dame Durden' is a charming conception."—*Morning Post.*

"It would be well indeed if fiction generally could be kept up to this level."—*Academy.*

MY LADY COQUETTE

"Of great merit; well worked out; a good idea is embodied; the author carries the reader's sympathy with her."—*Athenæum.*

VIVIENNE

"'RITA' has produced a novel as enthralling as Wilkie Collins' 'Woman in White,' or Miss Braddon's 'Lady Audley's Secret.'"—*Standard.*

"'Vivienne' is intensely dramatic, abounding in incident and sensation."—*Telegraph.*

LIKE DIAN'S KISS

"A pretty story, remarkable alike for pathos and clever portraiture."—*Times*

COUNTESS DAPHNE

"It is written with considerable skill."—*Athenæum.*

FRAGOLETTA

"The Italian heroine certainly falls into most romantic circumstances—enough in combination to break down a stronger nature than that of the little maiden of the story."—*Athenæum.*

A SINLESS SECRET

"Simple and pathetic episodes. There is melody in many of the love passages, where the dialogue is sweetly pretty without becoming tame or sickly."—*Academy.*

FAUSTINE

"'Faustine' is a remarkable work, and will greatly enhance the author's reputation as a writer."—*Court Journal.*

AFTER LONG GRIEF AND PAIN

"The moral of the story is sound, the dialogue smart and lively, and the style clear and vigorous throughout."—*Daily Telegraph.*

TWO BAD BLUE EYES

"In the present volume there is a good deal of clever writing, and a percentage of thought in the dialogue."—*Athenæum.*

J. & R. MAXWELL, Milton House, 14 and 15, Shoe Lane, Fleet Street;
and 35, St. Bride Street, Ludgate Circus, E.C.
And at all Railway Bookstalls, Booksellers, and Newsagents.